

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

**AN ANATOMY OF A SLAVE SOCIETY IN TRANSITION:  
THE VIRGIN ISLANDS, 1807-1864.**

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## **Abstract**

This study analyses the process of transition from slavery to freedom in the Virgin Islands' slave society. It draws on a database of over 9,500 enslaved people of African descent, covering the period 1818 to 1834. Including information on gender, age, births, deaths, runaways, manumissions, and owners of the enslaved, this database allows the most intimate and comprehensive analysis of changes in the social life of the slave population and immediate descendants within any single British Caribbean territory in the age of abolitionism and its aftermath. Few studies in Caribbean history have sought to go beyond the transition from slavery to freedom and more specifically, to explore the impact of the enslaved themselves in shaping their own history during this critical transition. This thesis seeks to do both by re-examining the history of the Virgin Islands from 1807 to 1864, underpinning the argument it presents with data drawn from slave registers, Colonial Office and Parliamentary papers, and other records. It is on these grounds that this thesis makes an original contribution to existing knowledge.

## Table of Content

List of Figures	iv
List of Tables	iv
Acknowledgements	vii
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1    Slave Society</b>	<b>18</b>
Population Distribution	19
Lands Use	22
Slave Holders	24
The Slave Population	32
The Slave Population on Tortola	41
The Slave Population on the Cays	48
Social and Cultural life	54
Summary	59
<b>Chapter 2    Dislocation</b>	<b>61</b>
Internal transfer of Slaves	67
Ruth Lettsome Estates	73
Inter-regional Slave Transfers	77
Pickering Estate	80
Martin Estate	90
Threlfall Estate	93
Summary	99
<b>Chapter 3    Manumissions</b>	<b>101</b>
The Process of Manumission	102
Rates of Manumission	113
Manumissions by Age and Gender	118
Manumissions by Colour of skin	123
Relationships that led to Manumissions	127
Summary	135

<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Resistance</b>	<b>136</b>
	Running Away	140
	Day to Day Resistance	160
	Adaptation	165
	Collective Resistance	172
	Summary	184
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Apprenticeship</b>	<b>184</b>
	The Apprenticeship System	187
	The Apprenticeship Population	193
	Maximizing the Labour Force	199
	Manumissions and Migrations	204
	Resistance and Signs of Discontent	208
	Summary	217
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Post Emancipation</b>	<b>219</b>
	Methods of Control	221
	Passive Resistance	230
	Economic Adjustment	237
	Cattle Tax Riots	244
	Land Acquisition	255
	Summary	259
	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>260</b>
	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>266</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>269</b>

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1.1 Map of the Caribbean	1
Figure 1.2 Old map of the Virgin Islands	3
Figure 1.3 Land Subdivisions on Tortola	23
Figure 1.4 Virgin Islands Slave Population Pyramid, 1818.	36
Figure 1.5 Pleasant Valley Estate, Tortola.	43
Figure 3.1 Frequency of Manumissions	116
Figure 4.1 Frequency of Runaway Slaves	148
Figure 4.2 Frequency of Runaway Slaves by Gender 1822-1834	152
Figure 5.1 Punishment Inflicted on Apprentices 1834-1835	215
Figure 6.1 Sugar Exported from the Virgin Islands to the United Kingdom	239

## **List of Tables**

Table 1.1 Virgin Islands Population Distribution, 1815	21
Table 1.2 Virgin Islands Land Uses 1815.	24
Table 1.3 The Frequency of Slave Holdings on Tortola and the Cays.	26
Table 1.4 Slave Population, Belle Vue Estate, 1818.	35
Table 1.5 Tortola Slave Population Percentages, 1818.	42
Table 1.6 The Cays Slave population Percentages, 1818.	49
Table 1.7 Anegada Slave Population percentages, 1818.	52
Table 2.1 Tortola's Economic Output	64
Table 2.2 The Cays' Economic Output	64
Table 2.3 Percentages of Slave Transfers between 1818 and 1831.	70
Table 2.4 Percentages of Slaves sold in the Virgin Islands , 1818-1831.	71
Table 2.5 Ruth Lettsome Estates by Acreage and Number of Slaves,1818.	74
Table 2.6 Percentages of Slave on the Lettsome Estates, 1825.	74
Table 2.7 Percentage of Slaves Exported from Tortola, 1822-1825.	78
Table 2.8 Percentage of Slaves Exported from The Cays, 1822-1825.	78
Table 2.9 Percentage of Slaves on the Pickering Estates, 1822.	88
Table 2.10 Percentage of Slaves on the Martin Estates, 1825.	92
Table 2.11 Percentage of Slaves on the Threlfall Estate, 1825.	94
Table 3.1 Manumissions 1808-1817	106
Table 3.2 Manumission Rates	115
Table 3.3 Manumission Totals and Percentages	118
Table 3.4 Percentage of manumission on the Cays by Gender Groups1822-1824.	119
Table 3.5 Percentage of Manumissions on Tortola by Gender Groups 1818-1834.	121

Table 3.6 Percentage of Manumission by Colour 1822	125
Table 3.7 Percentage of Manumission by Skin Colour 1828	127
Table 4.1 Percentage of Runaway or Absent Slaves by Age and Gender	153
Table 4.2 Average Age of Slaves Runaways by Gender.	155
Table 4.3 Percentage of Runaway Slaves from Road Town	158
Table 4.4 Livestock Ownership in the Virgin Islands in 1823.	169
Table 5.1 Distribution of the Virgin Islands' Slave Population in 1834 by Percentage.	194
Table 5.2 Percentage Distribution of Slaves on Tortola and the Cays 1834.	197
Table 5.3 Percentage of Apprentices Convicted for Offences 1834-1835.	212

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## Introduction

In recent years a range of studies have been conducted on the history of the British Caribbean focusing on the legacies of the Atlantic slave trade. These studies, in their widest context, have contributed tremendously to scholarship in the field and enhanced our understanding of the subject. While some studies focused on the experiences of the enslaved in individual colonies, few attempted to transcend the transition from slavery to freedom. Through these studies we are able to identify the origins of basic ideologies, social and cultural perceptions that influence thinking within Caribbean societies even today. Missing from this growing area of empirical study however, is research on the Virgin Islands, one of the smallest sugar colonies in the British Caribbean. As the Virgin Islands are rarely featured, very little is known about them, even their location.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.1** Map of the Caribbean, British Virgin Islands Annual Report 1975, enclosure ( London 1976)

<sup>1</sup> Franklin W. Knight, 'Introduction' in *General History of the Caribbean: Vol. III The Caribbean Slave Society*, ed. Franklin W. Knight (London: UNESCO Publishing 1997), 1-8; David Richardson, 'Agency, Ideology, and Violence in the History of Transatlantic Slavery,' *The Historic Journal*, 50:4 (2007), 971-989; Kevin D. Smith, 'A Fragmented Freedom: The Historiography of Emancipation and its Aftermath in the British West Indies' *Slavery and Abolition*, 16:1 (1995), 101-131; Keith Mason, "Demography, Disease and Medical Care in Caribbean Slave Society", *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 5 (1986): 109-119.

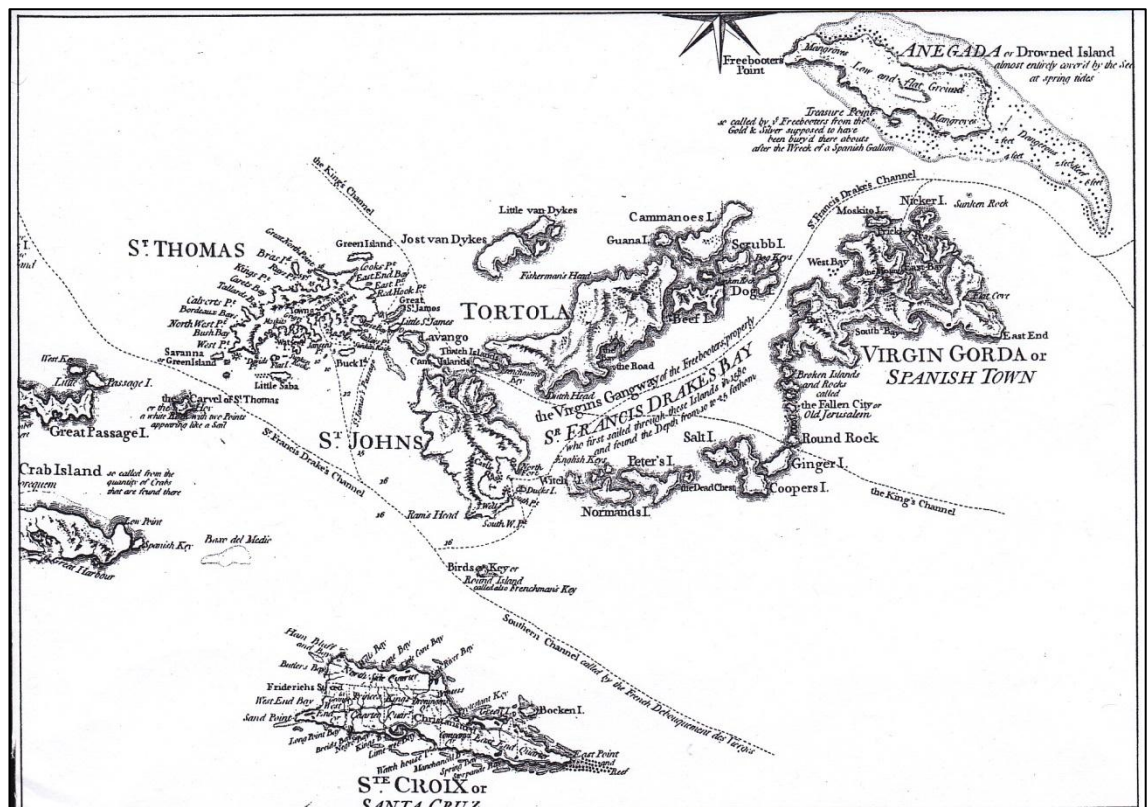


The Virgin Islands are located at the northern arch of the Caribbean archipelago, around Latitude 18.25° north and Longitude 64.30° west (see figure 1.1). This position places the colony 30 miles east of Puerto Rico and 40 miles north of St. Kitts, its closest Leeward Islands neighbour. With an area of about fifty-nine square miles, the group is comprised of sixty islands, the largest of which being Jost Van Dyke, Spanish Town (Virgin Gorda), Anegada and Tortola, where the capital Road Town is located. Figure 1.2 shows that the majority of the smaller islands are located to the south of Tortola, stretching in a parallel line running south-west to east-north-east forming a channel three to four miles wide and fifteen miles long. The islands that fall outside of this channel include Jost Van Dyke which is four miles to the north-west of Tortola and Anegada, which is thirty miles north-east of Tortola. This channel, which is popularly known as the Sir Francis Drake Channel or the Virgin's Gang Way, offers a spectacular sailing adventure which prompted an early visitors to the Virgin Islands in 1701 to declare that "It is certainly among the best sailing in the world. It is as if one is on a vast plain dotted about with small corpse"<sup>2</sup> The Virgin Islands is also in close proximity to the Danish islands of St Thomas and St John, sharing a common maritime boundary with about two miles of water between them at the closest point.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Baptiste Labat, "A Voyage from the Virgin Islands to St. Christopher in 1701" in *Leewards: Writings, Past and Present, About The Leeward Islands* ed. John Brown (Barbados: Advocate co. 1961), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Norwell Harrigan and Pearl Varlack, *The Virgin Islands Story* (Essex: Bowker Publishing 1975), xii –xv.



**Figure 1.2** Old Map of the Virgin Islands,  
<http://collections.nmm.ac.uk/collections/objects/542121.html>

The majority of the islands in the grouping are of volcanic origin and are characterized by steep central hill ranges flowing towards the sea. The exception is the island of Anegada which is of coral formation, ‘extremely flat and low except in the middle where the ground rises slightly.’ Most of the land on Anegada is below sea level and the island is almost completely surrounded by reefs. Tortola, the largest island in the Virgin Islands, measures 26 square miles, which accounts for 44 per cent of the land mass in the colony. The highest peak in the Virgin Islands, Sage Mountain, rises to a height of 1,780 feet and is located on the island of Tortola. As a result of the overwhelmingly hilly nature of the islands, there are only an estimated 700 acres of flat land in the colony which is located in narrow valleys. The temperature in the Virgin

Islands ranges from 70 – 87 degrees Fahrenheit and rain fall averages 55 inches annually.<sup>4</sup>

It was these geographic features that led the Earl of Cumberland, when he visited the Virgin Islands in 1596, to describe the colony as ‘barren, craggy, and sandy,’ and not at all suited to any kind of cultivation. Nevertheless, the British’s long and uninterrupted occupation of the Virgin Islands commenced in 1672 when the islands were taken from the Dutch, who later tried unsuccessfully to regain them. Clearly, while the British had previously regarded the islands as unsuited to their purpose, they had no intention of allowing them to fall into the hands of another nation. This was because the Virgin Islands’ geographical position and features could have been used by pirates and buccaneers who threatened British navigation and trade in the region.<sup>5</sup>

The British settlers who eventually comprised the pioneer society of the Virgin Islands in the late seventeenth century, were planters from the island of Anguilla. They endeavoured – with the aid of their slaves and cattle – to clear the land and prepare the soil for crop production. In this venture, the forest that covered the islands was removed and the rocks on the hillside were dislodged and rolled into the valleys below. In 1717, the first recorded population for the Virgin Islands comprised 476 whites and 546 slaves. The initial pursuits were in the planting of cotton, tobacco and indigo but gradually attention turned to sugar, which required more capital than the settlers had at their disposal. Thus, they turned to the merchants and slave traders who provided them, through credit, with an ample supply of slaves and other necessities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; Labat, *A Voyage From the Virgin Islands*, 25; John P. Augelli, “The British Virgin Islands: A West Indian Anomaly” *Geographical Review*, Vol.46, No. 1 (1956), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Trelawney Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book* Vol. I (London 1834), 23-237; George Suckling, *A Historical Account of the Virgin Islands in the West Indies* (London, 1780), 1-13.

<sup>6</sup> Suckling, *A Historical Account*, 1-13; PP 1789 A Statement of the Laws at Large Respecting Negroes in the West India Islands, Part IV, Population No.2, Leeward Islands (1789), 275.

With a direct link to a continuous labour supply, some of the planters were enticed to abandon cotton and focus their attention on the production of sugar. In fact, many of the smaller cotton producers were forced out of business as their properties were subsumed by the ever expanding sugar estates. In commenting on the situation, John Fahie, President of the Virgin Islands stated ‘It is here as everywhere else, the big fish swallows up the small. The estates of the poor cotton planters which were contiguous to sugar estates have been swallowed up by them.’<sup>7</sup> Expansion in the production of sugar was also accompanied by an escalation in the importation of slaves into the colony. The Virgin Islands was following the path of several other colonies in the region and by the last quarter of eighteenth century, the colony had “transformed itself into a sugar colony.”<sup>8</sup> In recounting the process, Thomas Woolrich, a Quaker merchant who resided in the Virgin Islands between the years 1753 and 1773, stated that because of the need for labour to clear new grounds for the expansion of sugar estates, planters bought large numbers of slaves, a third of whom died in the first year, in the period of seasoning. New slaves were then acquired to replace those that were deceased.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, during the period 1754 to 1807 when the slave trade ended, a total of 12,662 slaves were transported to the Virgin Islands by means of 48 voyages. For example, on 20 April 1788 the sloop, *Lion*, captained by Thomas Walker, arrived in the Virgin Islands with 107 slaves. The slaves, who originated from the Windward coast of Africa, were described as being in good health, but the agent William Grumly expressed dismay that more than half of them were children ‘fit for nothing but to feed.’ Grumly

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<sup>7</sup> C.O.152/63 Fahie to Shirley 5 April 1784.

<sup>8</sup> Elsa V. Goveia *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 104.

<sup>9</sup> PP1790 Minutes of the Evidence taken Before a Committee of the House of Commons, Evidence of Thomas Woolrich (1790), 264-267; Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies 1623 – 1775* (Essex: Caribbean University Press 1974), 118 – 122, 104, 162-164; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 189.

was sorry that he had taken the shipment as he felt selling that particular group of slaves would have been difficult. A few weeks later, however, Grumly reported that he had sold eight of the children for £20 per head. There is also evidence that the Virgin Islands was a major trans-shipment point for slaves. For example in 1799, of the 304 slaves imported into the colony, 172 were exported to St Thomas, Dominica, Grenada, and Trinidad.<sup>10</sup>

In 1773 Ralph Payne, Governor of the Leeward Islands, on his first visit to the Virgin Islands observed that; ‘The Island of Tortola unquestionably deserved a Rank and Reputation among his majesty’s sugar colonies, which has very little been suspected.’ In the Governor’s opinion, the land in the Virgin Islands was of the same good quality as that found in the other Leeward Islands and the annual exports of sugar were almost the same as that of Montserrat, with prospects for increased production. Available figures show that the value of sugar exports from the colony in 1787 was £164,000 in comparison to the general exports of 1740 which was £30,000. In 1740 there were 1,500 slaves in the Virgin Islands, that number soared to 9,000 in 1774 and declined to about 8,000 in 1789. In 1789 the white population was estimated at 1,000.<sup>11</sup>

By the close of the eighteenth century, it was evident that the plantation system based on the production of sugar did not bring lasting prosperity to the Virgin Islands. The sugar economy was exposed to many threats locally, regionally and internationally, which were all outside of the control of the planters. The rapid economic growth of the

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces>; Chancery ( C ) 107/1-15 Papers of James Rogers Papers, Grumly to Rogers 21 May, 23 June 1788; PP1801-02 Accounts, Presented to the House of Commons (1802), 48; Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, ( Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 127-162; David Galenson, “The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Barbados Market,” 1673-1723, *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. XLII no. 3 (1982), 491-511.

<sup>11</sup> C.O. 152/53 Pane to The Earl of Dartmouth 10 June 1773; Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands 1672 – 1970* (1975); *A History of the West Indies Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island* Vol. III (London, 1811), 90-92, 111; Trelawney Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book Vol. I* (London 1834), 23-237; Suckling, *A Historical Account*, 1-13; John P. Augelli, “The British Virgin Islands,” 44 - 47.

previous decade based on excessive mortgages and extended lines of credit, proved disastrous to many of the planters. To meet their debts, many were forced to liquidate their assets in what became an increasingly weak market. Woolrich, in relating information on this state of affairs, pointed out that the financial hardship of planters further increased the plight of the slaves who in essence were compelled to exert even more energy with even less sustenance and care.<sup>12</sup>

In 1805 prior to the abolition of the slave trade, the slave population in the Virgin Islands stood at 7,448. When compared to previous numbers and imports, there is a clear indication that the slave population was in decline and that numbers were not being sustained through natural means. Even though the Virgin Islands was isolated from the other British Caribbean colonies, its experiences with regards to slavery and the plantation system were very similar and at times more profound. In particular, the abolition of the slave trade had unimaginable consequences that would greatly impact not only the Virgin Islands, but also the entire British Caribbean. One of the views held was that the abolition of the slave trade would result in ameliorated conditions for the existing slaves, leading to a natural increase in their numbers. The extent to which such an intended policy impacted the lives of the slave population the Virgin Islands is yet to be determined.<sup>13</sup>

The study of the demographic history of slavery in the British Caribbean attempts to unveil the hidden reasons why the planters were adamant that their labour force could not be maintained without the slave trade. Hence, after the abolition of the slave trade there was a call for the registration of slaves to prevent any illegal trade that might have

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<sup>12</sup> Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 105; PP1790 Minutes of the Evidence taken Before a Committee of the House of the House of Commons, Evidence of Thomas Woolrich (1790), 268-291.

<sup>13</sup> C. O.239/3 Correspondence from President Anderson 5 Feb. 1817; Barry W. Higman, *Slave Population of the British Caribbean 1807-1834* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press 1984), 72-78.

been taking place. The slave registers that were created captured a range of demographic information on the slaves in the region making them the largest single source of information on slavery in the British Caribbean. Additionally, the prolonged debate on the issue of slavery during the eighteenth and nineteenth century resulted in the production of large volumes of material, which are now stored in archives. To date, several researchers have delved into this treasure trove in an attempt to get a better understanding of the life and experiences of the enslaved.<sup>14</sup>

The most extensive research in this field was undertaken by Barry Higman who conducted a comparative analysis of the slave populations in all the colonies in the British Caribbean, spanning the period 1807 to 1834. This analysis was conducted from a materialistic perspective noting that differences in the demographic performance of the slaves in relation to their material conditions was influenced by their working conditions. In taking this approach, it was recognised that slaves were human beings and as such, through their interaction, had an impact on the slave societies in the Caribbean.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the demographic history of slavery in the British Caribbean allows us to move beyond the moral issues of slavery and focus on the human existence of the enslaved. While several studies have been conducted focusing on fertility and mortality among the enslaved in the region, a critical look at the life experiences of the enslaved might be even more beneficial. Indeed the extent to which the enslaved populations in the region overcame the harsh conditions to which they were subjected and created a life for themselves, needs to be fully understood. Such an understanding can be achieved through an analysis of the slave society which utilizes the demographic data of the enslaved in an attempt to recreate their experiences. This approach is particularly useful in circumstances where there is limited or scattered archival

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<sup>14</sup> Higman, *Slave population*, 1-5, 395-397

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

information on the particular slave society. The demographic data then becomes the skeletal base of the findings that is supported and enhanced by available qualitative data.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Virgin Islands Slave Database**

There are six registers containing demographic information on slaves in the Virgin Islands during the period 1818-1834 that are held in the British National Archive at Kew Gardens.<sup>17</sup> Digital images of the original documents are also available online on the web site <http://www.ancestry.co.uk/>. This information was used to create an electronic database using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Firstly a coding system was applied to the data (See Appendix A) focusing on the slave as the unit of analysis. Thus, the information compiled in the database is in relation to individual slaves. The variables identified were selected based on the main demographic information contained in the registers. This information, when tabulated and analysed, would give a demographic sketch of the overall slave population in the Virgin Islands during the period 1818-1834. An explanation for the use of each variable is as follows.

The name of the slave was the most important variable. However, since the majority of slaves in the Virgin Islands, as in other colonies in the British Caribbean, were assigned only one name, most of which were commonplace, slave owners utilized several methods to distinguish between individuals with the same name. For example, classification by size or age might be used: big Mary, little John, old Joe; by colour:

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<sup>16</sup> Mason, *Demography, Disease and Medical Care*, 109; Michael Craton "Jamaica Slave Mortality: Fresh Light From Worthy Par, Longville and Tharp Estate" *Journal Of Caribbean History* Vol. 3 (1973); Meridith A. John, Plantation Slave Mortality in Trinidad *Population Studies* Vol.42 No.2 (Jul. 1988),161; Jeffrey P. Koplan, "Slave Mortality in Nineteen Century Grenada", *Social Science History* Vol. & No. 3(Summer 1983), 318; Richard B. Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves "A Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680 -1834" (London 1985), 138; Gerald G. Friedman, "The Height of Slave in Trinidad" *Social Science History* Vol.6 No. 4 (1982); Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, "Fertility Differentials Between Slaves in the United States and the British West Indies: A note on Lactation Practices and Their Implications" *The William And Mary Quarterly*, Third series, Vol. 35 No. 2 (1978 ).

<sup>17</sup> T71/370, 371,372,373,374,375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1818, 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831, 1834.



mulatto Jim or by profession: Saddler Tom. In the case of the children, at times they were identified with their mother's name: Margo's Sue. These identifiers or labels were no doubt useful to the slave owners and were also heavily relied upon in inputting and linking data on individual slaves.<sup>18</sup>

With regards gender, this category of information was the most straight-forward of all the variables, as each slave throughout the registration process was identified as male or female, boy or girl, man or woman. Thus, unlike other colonies where such information was omitted, there is no need to resort to guess work based on names. Further, the established practice by slave owners and their agents of grouping slaves according to gender on their returns, also helped to identify what, at times, were errors in transcribing the manuscript. Nationality or place of birth of the slaves was another important variable which was used. Generally, slaves in the Virgin Islands were identified as being born in the Caribbean or more specifically in the Virgin Islands or simply as creoles as opposed to slaves born in Africa. Rarely was any attempt made to identify exactly the region in Africa or the tribe from which African-born slaves originated. Slaves born after 1818 were identified as being born on specific islands in the Virgin Islands. This is quite a useful inclusion as it would allow for an analysis of birth rates based on specific islands within the Virgin Islands chain.<sup>19</sup>

The registration forms classified the age of slaves as reputed age, seemingly in recognition of the fact that owners would not always be aware of the exact ages of their slaves. In most cases, however, there appears to be a consistent application of the assigned ages. As cited by Meredith A. John in relation to the Trinidad Registration,

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<sup>18</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 16, 21.

“there is a clear evidence of heaping of ages in multiples of five.”<sup>20</sup> To all indication, however, this practice was not widespread as it seems to have been confined to specific slave holdings.<sup>21</sup>

Of all the variables used, skin colour offers the most varied interpretation as it was left to the discretion of the slave owner. In some instances the term Negro was used as a general description of all black slaves, while mulatto indicated those who were of mixed race. Varying shades of colour: dark brown, light brown, yellow and degrees of mixed race: Mulatto, Mustee, Sambo were also used. To facilitate the analysis of the data, the information presented was classified under two specific headings: Black and Coloured. In dealing with data relating to skin colour Higman states that, “The major problem with the data on colour is that they refer both to visible, perceived bodily characteristics and to known histories of miscegenation”<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, even though the slave is the unit of analysis, information on the slave holders - gender, colour, education and type of ownership example renters - was also entered into the database. This information helped in identifying individual slaves based on ownership and allowed for an analysis of the slave population based on ownership patterns and characteristics and of slave holders.<sup>23</sup>

## **Fate Fields**

One of the most important features of the database was the Fate Fields, which captured the changing status of each slave in subsequent registers, following the establishment of

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<sup>20</sup> Meredith A. John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad, 1783-1816: A mathematical and demographic enquiry*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 166.

<sup>21</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 19-21.

<sup>22</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 100-115

the Original Register which was compiled in 1818. Thus, there is a fate variable for the years of registration 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831 and 1834 in which changes with respect to change of ownership (sales, gifts) manumission, runaways, exports and deaths were submitted on Schedule C (See Appendix B). Information from Schedule B (see Appendix B) which included imports, returned fugitives, births and purchases were also entered under the fate fields. One observation with regards to the slave register across the British Caribbean is that children who were born and died within a registration period were not accounted for in the register. As observed by G.W. Roberts, this means that the overall births and infant deaths were underreported.<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to capture information on new slaves at the point of entry into the system, the registration variable was used to identify the year of first registration. While the majority of slaves were registered in 1818 subsequent years saw the inclusion of new slaves through births, correction of originally omitted slaves, and new imports which were restricted to domestic slaves. After identifying the variables to be used in this research, a codebook was developed (See Appendix A). An identification number was assigned to each slave listed in the register and the demographic information coded according to the codebook referred to above. Once this was completed, the information relating to each slave was linked to the identification numbers assigned, and was entered into the data base. This first phase of the process was relatively easy with the only difficulty experienced being the ciphering of the handwriting in the register. Upon completion of this phase, work commenced on coding and recording the changes in relation to specific slaves identified in the subsequent registers beginning with the register submitted in 1822.

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<sup>24</sup> G.W. Roberts, "A Life Table for a West Indian Slave Plantation" *Population Studies* Vol. 5 No. 3 (1952).

First, new entries were assigned identification numbers and their names added to the continuous list of slaves in the database. The demographic information as coded in relation to these individuals was also inputted into the database. Changes relating to these individuals was also coded and entered into the relevant fate field for the year concerned. A similar exercise was then undertaken to input the data reflecting the changes highlighted, linking the information with the slaves in the original or subsequent registers. This was by far an extremely time-consuming task that increased in difficulty as more information was added to the database. In fact, in any one year several fate fields had to be created to capture the numerous changes that some slaves were subject to.

In identifying the slaves, the owner's name was used initially and comparison established with recorded demographic information. Additionally, it was observed that slave owners and managers, as required on Schedule C of the registration form (See Appendix B), consistently linked the names of slaves with the numbers assigned on the original or subsequent list. This practice helped tremendously in locating the slaves for whom there were changes in status or ownership, to a high degree of accuracy. The procedure as outlined above was followed systematically in inputting the information from all the registers 1818 to 1834, thus making it possible to trace each slave throughout the period of registration. By far, however, the most important output of this database was a range of demographic data that was used to analyse the process of transition in the Virgin Islands slave society during the final years of slavery. The research departs from existing studies in that it used the entire slave population as the means of analysis thereby eliminating need to generalise based on smaller samples.

The thesis is structured into six chapters. Chapter one presents a sketch of the Virgin Islands slave society in the early 1800s taking into consideration the population distribution, land use and slave ownership. The slave population data for 1818 is presented and analysed in an attempt to determine a baseline against which demographic changes in the colony during the final decades of slavery can be measured. The chapter discusses how the level of wellbeing among the enslaved varied with respect to the colony's two economic sectors – sugar on Tortola and non-sugar on the Cays, with sugar having the greatest negative effect on workers. It also looks at the colony's slave population to determine if the structures exhibited resembled a closed and settled population which was positioned to experience natural increase.

Chapter 2 examines the extent to which the declining economy of the Virgin Islands prompted the high rates of dislocation among the enslaved population. Circumstances that led to the internal transfers of slaves are identified and the number of slaves involved are analysed. Particular attention is paid to those transfers that involved the enslaved on the Cays as they were relocated to sugar estates on Tortola where they were faced with a different line of work. On the Cays, the main cash crop was cotton. The high number of slaves in the colony who were transferred regionally as part of the inter-colonial traffic in slaves will also be examined.

Chapter 3 analyses the rate of manumissions in the Virgin Islands during the final decades of slavery. The various modes of manumissions will be discussed and examples given to support each type. As manumission encompasses a social process, relationships between slaves, their masters and other free persons, which facilitate manumission will be examined to determine how they affected rates of manumissions. Additionally, rates

of manumission with regards to subgroups of slaves, rural versus urban, coloured versus blacks, the Cays versus Tortola and males versus females will be compared.

Chapter 4 examines the different types of resistance that were evident among the enslaved in the Virgin Islands. The issue of running away will be looked at focusing on the extent to which this action was used as a means of negotiating improved conditions, gaining concessions and improving chances for manumission. The rate of absenteeism or incidences of running away in the Virgin Islands will be determined and comparisons made with other colonies in the region. The Chapter also shows that while some of the slaves did not run away, there were those who engaged in various forms of day-to-day resistance and those who adapted to various aspects of slavery in an effort to ensure their survival and enhance their levels of autonomy and personal responsibility. The last section of the Chapter assesses in detail the circumstances surrounding a failed conspiracy and the response of the white community.

Chapter 5 examines the implementation of the apprenticeship system focusing on the difficulties experienced by the apprentices as the planters attempted to continue controlling the lives of the enslaved. The decision of the apprentices to seek to exercise their right to manumission and make decisions to migrate in search of new opportunities is also looked at. The Chapter shows that while the apprenticeship period threatened to undermine the gains that were made during the difficult years of slavery and apprenticeship, the apprentices managed to maintain their hold on the internal economy.

Chapter 6 outlines the experiences of the ex-slaves as they struggled to attain meaningful freedom after the termination of the apprenticeship system. In particular, the ex-slaves endured coercion by their former masters and accepted low wages in an

attempt to retain access to their provision grounds and pastures. The Chapter shows that as the formal economy declined, the internal economy controlled by the ex-slaves gained prominence with the export of cattle and other livestock to St. Thomas. In an attempt to capitalize on the growing success of the labourers, the government increased the cattle tax by 50 per cent sparking a riot which changed the course of the history in the colony. Lastly, the chapter concludes by examining how the peasants in the colony were able to gain ownership of the greater part of the land in the Virgin Islands by the close of 1864. This date is used as an outer limit of the study but in no way indicates that the process of transition from slavery to freedom in the Virgin Islands was completed.

This study of the Virgin Islands bridges the transition from slavery to freedom, focusing on the demographic and social experiences of the slaves in the colony. The issues that facilitated or impeded the process are highlighted. Thus, while the theme changed from one period to another, the enslaved and their goal to attain freedom remained constant. The importance of this study can never be overstated with respect to the methodological approach and the advancement of knowledge on the social characteristics of the enslaved in the region. The use of an entire population as a means of analysis offers a level of statistical credibility that is vital in the study of slavery. The fact that such an approach is only useful with small manageable populations must also be noted. Be that as it may, this study and the database which was created, offers a range of new demographic information on slavery in the British Caribbean. The information in the database however is limited to the specific type and range of information that was required during the compilation of the slaves registers in the period 1818-1834. For example, while the slave register for some colonies contain information on the occupation of slaves and their family connections, in the case of the Virgin Islands such

details were not recorded. This type of information would have greatly enhanced this study of the lives and experience of the enslaved in the Virgin Islands. Additionally, the shortage of relevant archival material to support observed trends and patterns also proved to be a limitation. For example, the large-scale movement of enslaved persons within the Virgin Islands would have had a major social implication but there is no available material to support such theories.

There is no doubt that this study on the Virgin Islands will encourage other studies on similar sized slave societies in the British Caribbean. One study that is recommended is a comparative analysis of the effect of slavery and emancipation on the Virgin Islands and Montserrat the two smallest sugar colonies in the British Caribbean.



## Chapter 1

### Slave Society

This chapter explores the fundamental characteristics of the Virgin Islands slave society in the period 1807 to 1818. In the process, population distribution, land use, slave holders and the demographic structure of the enslaved population in the colony will be examined. The chapter aims to determine the extent to which the experiences of the enslaved in the Virgin Islands compare to the experiences of the enslaved in the wider British Caribbean region.

The abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 was seen, in some circles, as one of the most important events during the period of slavery in the British Caribbean. That historic decision, which was vehemently opposed by planters and their supporters inside and outside of the region, led to major changes in the slave societies in the British Caribbean. Planters were forced to rethink their labour strategies as they were no longer in a position to replenish their stocks of slaves with new imports from Africa. At the time of the abolition of the slave trade, the majority of the colonies in the British Caribbean were mature slave societies where ‘staple production informed every aspect of life’ and slaves were needed to ensure production. Thus the enslaved became precious commodities that had to be cared for to ensure their survival and availability to perform the tasks that were needed to maintain the plantation system. The slaves formed the foundation on which the societies existed and ‘dominated social interaction’ since they comprised the majority of population in many of the colonies. For example in the early nineteenth century the ratio of black to white in the Leeward Islands was 14:1, the highest in the region.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, ed. *Cultivation and Culture, Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 4; Barry W. Higman, *Population Jamaica 1750-1850* (Jamaica: The Press of the University of the West Indies, 2005), 3; Gad Heuman, “The Social Structure of Slave Societies in the Caribbean” in *General History of the Caribbean Vol. III The Slave Societies of the Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W.

Gad Heuman argues that the abolition of the slave trade resulted in an important demographic change in the slave population in the region. As the African born population declined, through natural wastage, the creole population increased improving birth rates, reducing death rates and enhancing opportunities for population growth. Thus Barry Higman posits that after 1807 there were ‘significant variations in levels of natural increase’ across the British Caribbean which can be linked to the material conditions of the enslaved. The type of staple production and the work regime to which the enslaved were confined was found to impact greatly on their overall condition and wellbeing. Sugar production in particular was found to have the greatest negative impact on the demographic experience of the slaves within the societies. Thus Higman points out that while the issues of survival are important, assessing the demographic characteristic of the slave society allows for a greater understanding of the social, cultural and the wider life experiences of the enslaved.<sup>2</sup>

### **Population Distribution**

In 1807 after the termination of the British slave trade, there were approximately 776, 105 slaves in the British Caribbean, 1 per cent (7,715) of whom were in the Virgin Islands. As stated in the Introduction, the colony’s slave population soared to 9, 000 in the latter half of the eighteenth century and clearly had begun to decline by the end of that century. The slave population in 1807 thus represented the high point for the nineteenth century as the number gradually declined throughout the final decades of slavery. Thus by 1815, the slave population in the Virgin Islands was 7, 285. This figure represents an annual declining rate of about 7 slaves per thousand. In the Virgin

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Knight (London: UNESCO Publishing, 2007), 155-156; Phillip D. Morgan, “Slavery in the British Caribbean”, in *The Cambridge World History Slavery Vol. 3 AD 1420 – AD 1804* eds. David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 386.

<sup>2</sup> Barry W. Higman, *Slave Population in the British Caribbean 1807-1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 395-397; Heuman, “The Social Structure of Slave Societies”, 155-156.

Islands and in the region, this existing labour pool had to suffice, especially with regards to the sugar estates where throughout the previous century there was a constant demand for fresh workers.

The abolition of the slave trade therefore resulted in a redistribution of slaves within colonies, with a movement from the non-sugar producing areas to the sugar producing areas. In the Leeward Islands, this redistribution also meant a geographical shift based on variations in the colonies' topography. For example, on the island of St. Kitts, the middle of the island which was the most mountainous area, had a lower population density than the extreme flat ends of the island which were the main sugar producing areas. This was also the case in Montserrat where the rugged, mountainous windward parishes had a lower density than the parish of St. Anthony, which was chiefly flat land and the area most suitable for sugar cane cultivation. In the Virgin Islands, as sugar production was concentrated on Tortola, the movement was away from the smaller islands or the Cays. By the latter half of the 1700s 63 per cent of the slaves in the Virgin Islands were located on Tortola as opposed to 37 per cent on the Cays. In 1815 the percentage of the slaves on Tortola had increased to 79 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

In 1815, eleven of the islands in the Virgin Islands were inhabited, the highest number in the colony's history. Seven of those islands were inhabited by enslaved individuals only, with no record of free persons, white or coloured, residing with them. The islands in this group with the greatest numbers of unsupervised enslaved persons were Cooper Island and Norman Island with 25 and 34 enslaved individuals respectively. This living arrangement meant that the enslaved concerned were relatively independent, with no

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<sup>3</sup> Barry W. Higman, *Slave Population*, 87-88; John J. McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution: The rum trade and the balance of payments of the thirteen continental colonies* (New York: Garland Publication, 1989), 618-621.

free overseer to dictate and order their daily existence. The other islands in this group of newly populated islands had a lower ratio of enslaved to free persons than the overall ratio in the colony, which was identified earlier as 5:1. Great Tobago, for example, with an enslaved population of three had a ratio of 1:1, while Frenchman's Cay and Camanoe had a ratio of 2:1 (Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1** Virgin Islands' Population Distribution, 1815.

	Whites		Free Blacks		Slaves	
<b>Island</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
Tortola	296	60.91	681.00	72.60	5, 765	79
Anegada	12	2.47	14.00	1.49	115	1.6
Spanish Town	102	20.99	130.00	13.86	507	7
Jost Van Dyke	25	5.14	32.00	3.41	371	5.1
Peter Island	23	4.73	25.00	2.67	132	1.8
Beef Island	12	2.47	0.00	0.00	130	1.8
Guana Island	7	1.44	12.00	1.28	105	1.4
Norman Island	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	34	0.5
Cooper Island	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	25	0.3
Great Camanoe	1	0.21	6.00	0.64	12	0.2
Ginger Island	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	5	0.1
Great Thatch	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	4	0.1
Salt Island	3	0.62	12.00	1.28	16	0.2
Prickley Pear Is.	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	3	0
Lt. Jost Van Dyke	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	5	0.1
Frenchman's Key	3	0.62	21.00	2.24	36	0.5
Necker Island	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	5	0.1
Great Tobago	0	0.00	3.00	0.32	3	0
Buck Island	2	0.41	2.00	0.21	12	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>938.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>7, 285</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: C.O. 239/ 9 Stabo Statistics on the Virgin Islands.

The slaves in the Virgin Islands comprised 84 per cent of the total population, outnumbering the white population by a ratio of 14:1. This rate was among the highest in the region in the early nineteenth century. For example, in Barbados and Jamaica blacks out-numbered whites at a rate of 5:1 and 12:1 respectively. The Virgin Islands,

however, was not alone as the rate of blacks to whites in the Leeward Islands in general was also 14:1. As stated earlier, these figures indicate the prominence which the enslaved held in the slave societies in the region, as the whole system of production depended entirely upon them. In the Virgin Islands the unique case of the Cays where the enslaved were the sole inhabitants totally responsible for managing and coordinating production, brings this point to the fore.

### **Land Use**

During the late eighteenth century, prior to the abolition of the British slave trade there were a total of 104 estates registered on the island of Tortola. The majority of these estates extended from the central hill range to the coast, comprising varying gradients of land and direct access to the sea for the purpose of shipping. Fifty-two were classified as sugar estates and only ten were listed as cotton estates. The record also shows that there were two estates, one which was used for pasture and the other belonging to the crown (public lands). Of the remaining 39 estates for which there were no identified crops or usage, five were being advertised for lease. Since several of the non-specified estates belonged to established sugar planters on Tortola, it is likely that these additional lands were used for sugar production or a supporting service such as pasture or provision grounds for the enslaved. By 1818, however, there was a total of 43 sugar estates operating in the Virgin Islands, all of which were located on the island of Tortola (Figure1.3).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Estate Map of Tortola (London, 1789); C.O.239/5 Colquhoun to The Earl Bathurst 26 January 1820; Anon., Letters from the Virgin Islands: Illustrating Life and Manners in the West Indies (London: 1842 ),13; Shepherd, "Alternative Husbandry" 41-66; Woodville Marshall, "Provision Grounds and Plantation Labour in Four Windward Islands : Competition for Resources During Slavery," in *The Slavery Reader*, eds. Gad Heuman and James Walvin ( London: Routledge, 2003), 470-483.



**Table 1.2 Virgin Islands Land Uses 1815**

<b>Islands</b>	<b>Size of the Island</b>	<b>Cane Cultivated</b>	<b>Cotton Cultivated</b>	<b>Provision Cultivated</b>	<b>Pasture Land</b>	<b>Bush Wood</b>	<b>Barren Land</b>
	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Acres</i>
The Cays	45302		920	741	26397	9641	6557
Tortola	13300	3125	95	1100	6458	1800	700
<b>Total</b>	<b>58602</b>	<b>3125</b>	<b>1015</b>	<b>1841</b>	<b>32855</b>	<b>11441</b>	<b>7257</b>

Source: CO 239/ 9 Stabo Statistics on the Virgin Islands.

While there are no similar records for the Cays indicating the subdivision and usage of lands, Table 1.2 above, gives a colony wide break down of land usage by acreage. When we take into consideration the total land mass in the Virgin Islands, it can be observed that the largest proportion of accessible land is on the Cays, which comprised close to 80 per cent of the land in the colony. While sugar was the main economic focus on Tortola – on about 23 per cent of the land – on the Cays 60 per cent of the land was for the pasturing of animals. Even more striking is the fact that as much as 80 per cent of the pasture lands in the colony were on the Cays. In the case of cotton which was planted on the Cays as well as on Tortola, 90 per cent of the land in the colony allocated for cotton was on the Cays. With the exception of sugar which was solely cultivated on Tortola, the only agricultural activity for which more land was allocated on Tortola than on the Cays was the planting of provisions. While 40 per cent of the colony's provision grounds were on the Cays, the remaining 60 per cent was on Tortola

### **Slave Holders**

As was stated earlier, the 1800s saw a continual decline in the white population in the Virgin Islands which was also evident across the British Caribbean. With the exception of Barbados where there was a 'rooted residential plantocracy', large numbers of the white population were exiting the region. For example, in Montserrat where the white population was 1,314 in 1772 there was a drastic reduction to 444 by 1811. This decline

can be traced back to the middle of the eighteenth century, when most of the older sugar colonies went through a period of consolidation where large sugar estates subsumed their smaller less profitable neighbours. Further as sugar planters experienced success, many decided to live in Britain as absentee planters.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the decline in the white population in the Virgin Islands, on 25 June 1817 a Bill entitled “An Act for Increasing the White Population of the Virgin Islands, and to prevent the unlawful Introduction of Negroes into the Island” was introduced in a meeting of the Colony’s Board of Council (the Upper House). While there are no details reflecting the provisions in the Bill and no evidence to indicate that it was ever passed into law, the actions of the Board stand testimony to the seriousness of the situation. The need for such an increase was specifically to improve the level of security in an environment where the white population was greatly outnumbered by the enslaved population. The 1818 slave register in the Virgin Islands reveals that there were 268 slave holders in the colony, amongst whom there were 272 slave holdings. Of the total number of slave owners 95 or 35 per cent were women and 10 or 3.7 per cent were free blacks and coloureds (Table 1.3).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 112; Lowell Joseph Ragatz, “Absentee Landlordism in the British Caribbean, 1750-1833,” *Agricultural History* Vol.5, No.1, (1931), 10; Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A medical and demographic history of slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 145.

<sup>6</sup> T71/ 370 Virgin Islands Slave Register, 1818; C.O.316/3 Minutes of Council 25 January 1817.



**Table 1.3** The Frequency of Slave Holdings on Tortola and The Cays

Slaveholding Size	Holders		Slaves	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1-10	179	65.81	661	9.57
11-50	50	18.38	1042	15.09
51-100	16	5.88	1172	16.97
101-200	24	8.82	3059	44.29
201+	3	1.10	973	14.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>6907</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

Table 1.3 above shows that in 1818 just over 75 per cent of the slaves in the Virgin Islands were owned by 15 per cent of slave holders. This finding shows that the means for wealth creation in the colony – that is ownership of slaves –was concentrated in the hands of a few. On the other hand over 85 per cent of the slave holders in the colony owned only about 25 per cent of the total slave population. The majority of slave holders, 179 of the total 229, possessed groups of ten or less slaves. The 1818 slave register also shows that a large number of estates in the Virgin Islands were in the hands of receivers, and managed by attorneys and agents. As the older planters died the estates were inherited by their heirs, who in most instances resided in Britain. (Table 1.3).<sup>7</sup>

The absentee system placed the responsibility of the management of estates in the hands of attorneys and managers, whose interest was not in the wellbeing of the enslaved or for that matter the success of the estates. At best, Higman found that with regards to the issues of managing estates on behalf of absentee owners, there is no simple way to determine if they were managed properly. There is no doubt that in this situation where the absentee planter expected maximum profit and where attorneys, overseers and managers manipulated the system for their own benefit the slaves would suffer greatly.

<sup>7</sup> A. Meredith John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad, 1783-1816: A mathematical and demographic enquiry*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 107-108; Lowell Joseph Ragatz, "Absentee Landlordism", 22; Barry W. Higman, *Plantation Jamaica 1750- 1850: Capital and control in a colonial economy* ( Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2005), 17-21.

For example Rev. Whitehouse, a Methodist missionary in the Virgin Islands noted that some of the worst conditions he had witnessed in the Virgin Islands in 1814 were on an estate owned by an absentee family in England. Whitehouse observed that the enslaved on that particular estate were forced to work hard daily without the necessary sustenance and health care.<sup>8</sup>

In 1797, the General Legislative Council and Assembly of the Leeward Islands, in heeding the recommendations of the Colonial Office enacted legislation for the protection of slaves; ‘to promote and encourage their increase and generally to ameliorate their condition’. The provisions in the act with respect to food rations, clothes and holidays from work were not new but represented what was already common practice. As a result of that enactment, what were considered privileges granted by slaves owners became ‘rights and entitlement’ legally due to the enslaved in the Leeward Islands colonies. Under this new act, slave masters were held accountable for the wellbeing of their slaves and by law were required to provide them with immediate access to medical attention when sick or hurt. All forms of ill-treatment of slaves were expressly prohibited and owners accused of such acts were liable to punishment on conviction. Even more specifically, the law provided that any ‘person charged with the murder or maiming of any slave... shall be tried and punished for such murder or maiming, in the same manner, without any sort of distinction or privilege, as if he or she was charged with the murder or maiming of any white or free person.’ Shortly, we will see how this section of the law was used in the Virgin Islands to bring one of the leading planters to justice when charged with the murder of a slave.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 146; Ragatz, “Absentee Landlordism”, 22; Methodist Missionary Society [MMS] West Indies Correspondence, Abraham Whitehouse, 18 August 1814; Higman, *Plantation Jamaica*, 289.

<sup>9</sup> PP1803-04 (119) Papers Presented to the house of Commons on the 7 May 1804, Respecting the slave-trade, 3-103

The objects and principles of the slave law as set out by the Leeward Islands Legislature reflected what Trevor Burnard describes as an ‘ideological shift’ that was gradually taking place in the British Caribbean towards the end of the eighteenth century. As the cruelties of slavery were being highlighted by the campaigns of abolitionists against the British slave trade, West Indian planters did damage control as they strove to show that the atrocities and exploits of slavery were things of the past. Thus, the new concept of discipline was not seen to include excessive physical punishment as efforts were made to create a ‘supportive’ atmosphere for the enslaved. It was still questionable whether this action truly represented a paradigm shift that was genuine enough to support a new and improved form of relationship between masters and slaves.<sup>10</sup>

In 1811, Arthur Hodge, a senior member of the Council in the Virgin Islands and proprietor of the Belle Vue Estate on Tortola, was charged for the murder of several of his slaves. Henry Leslie, the King’s Counsel in the Virgin Islands, in addressing the court on 25 April 1811, described Hodge as a ‘cruel oppressor, savage proprietor and relentless murderer.’ It was alleged that in July 1808 Prosper, a young man on the Belle Vue Estate, died as a result of a severe beating that was inflicted upon him on the instructions of Hodge. While some time had elapsed – three to four years – before the crime was brought to the attention of the authorities, Leslie pointed out that there was no statute of limitation on murder.<sup>11</sup>

The key witness in the trial against Hodge was Perreen George, a free coloured woman, who worked on the Belle Vue Estate for Hodge’s wife and was also manager of the Boiling House during crop time. George testified that Hodge had demanded that Prosper

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<sup>10</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Masters, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in Anglo-Jamaican World*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 105-106

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Mendes Belisario, *A Report on the Trial of Arthur Hodge for the Murder of his Negro Slave Named Prosper* (1812), 64-65.

pay six shillings for a mango which fell from a tree or he would be whipped. In desperation Prosper tried to borrow the money but was only able to collect three shillings which he presented to Hodge. Hodge then instructed that Prosper be held face down on the ground and whipped continuously for about one hour. The next day when Prosper did not produce the additional three shillings, he was tied to tree and whipped until he fell unconscious. His skin was cut up like a rag and there was no black left on him. Prosper was then taken to the sick house where he was chained with two other men for several days without any food. After five days the men broke free and ran away but Prosper was too weak to run so he went to his house where he was found dead a few days later.<sup>12</sup>

Another witness, Stephen McKeough, who worked as an overseer on the Belle Vue Estate, stated in a deposition that during the three years he worked for Hodge about 60 slaves died on the estate and only one of them of natural causes. McKeough also explained to the court that when he first started working on the estate Hodge instructed him to record the names of slaves who had died as runaways. However, when Hodge examined the books and found information he did not wish recorded he had the books destroyed and terminated the practice of record keeping. According to McKeough, Hodge was very brutal to all his slaves even the children, who he would punish by submerging them head first in a tank of water and holding them there until they were unconscious. They were then revived and the process repeated. Bella, an eight year old mulatto child which Hodge fathered by Peggy, one of his slaves, was often ill-treated by Hodge. On one occasion McKeough stated that he witnessed Hodge kick the child so hard that she landed several feet from where she was originally.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Belisario, *Trial of Arthur Hodge*, 94-100.

<sup>13</sup> PP1810-11(254) Papers relating to the West Indies: Correspondence between the Earl of Liverpool and Governor Elliott; in reference to the Trial and execution of Arthur Hodge for the murder of a Negro slave, Deposition of Stephen McKeough, 5-9; Belisario, *Trial of Arthur Hodge*, 111-119.

The image that was painted of Hodge before the court was very startling and closely resembled the character of Thomas Thistlewood of Jamaica who was described as ‘a brutal, sadistic master who controlled his slaves through the use of extreme violence and arbitrary and cruel tyranny.’ Like Thistlewood, Hodge seemed to enjoy inflicting pain on his slaves and in the Virgin Islands, at that time, it was an open secret that Hodge’s slaves could be identified by their burnt or scared mouths as he was known to pour hot water into the mouths of his slaves as punishment. With the overwhelming evidence presented, after two hours of deliberation the jury found Hodge guilty of the murder of Prosper and he was sentenced to death by hanging. Some of the members of the jury pleaded for mercy on Hodge’s behalf but their action was not supported by the trial Judge. Hugh Elliot, governor of the Leeward Islands who had relocated to the Virgin Islands to oversee the proceedings, ordered that the execution be carried out.<sup>14</sup>

Thus on 8 May 1811, history was made in the Virgin Islands when Arthur Hodge, a white slave owner, was executed for the murder of one of his slaves. The trial had posed a major dilemma not only for the Virgin Islands’ slave society but for the institution of slavery in the British Caribbean. Throughout the trial there was a state of unease in the Virgin Islands, thus prompting the Governor to declare martial law after the guilty verdict was returned, only lifting it after Hodge was executed. If Hodge was found guilty and allowed to go free because of his colour and standing in society, what then would have been the state of slaves not only in the Virgin Islands but in the region as a whole? Hence, the execution of Hodge signalled to all that a new day had dawned and that the enslaved, in spite of their status in the slave society, were human beings whose lives were valued.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 103-104; Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica 1750-86* (London: MacMillan Press, 1989), 66, 72-73; PP1810-11 Elliot to the Earl of Liverpool 3 May 1811, 9 May 1811 Folios no. 4 & 5.

<sup>15</sup> PP1810-11(254) Elliot to the Earl of Liverpool 3 May 1811, 9 May 1811 Folios no. 4 & 5

The Earl of Liverpool, in responding to Governor Elliot's correspondence relating to the proceeding of the trial of Arthur Hodge, expressed his hope that the 'rare example of just retribution may effect that change in the treatment of the unfortunate slaves, that it should require no other motives to produce than the common feelings of humanity towards a fellow-creature, or even the common regard to public decency.'<sup>16</sup> The Earl laid copies of his correspondences with Governor Elliot and details of the trial before the House of Commons which were ordered to be printed on July 26, 1811. Similar papers presented to the House of Lords were also printed and made public on 1<sup>st</sup> July, resulting in the publication of articles on the trial in the *Times* and the *Globe* newspapers. Two leading magazines, the *Christian Observer* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* also carried feature articles in their July issues outlining details of the trial and execution.<sup>17</sup>

The most detailed publication on the event however, stemmed from the meticulous transcript of the trial taken by Abraham Belisario, a merchant on Tortola, who served as a member of the Grand Jury. The transcript, along with copies of the depositions, which were certified by Richard Hetherington the President of the Virgin Islands and approved by the Council and Assembly of the Colony, were sent to Belisario's brother in London who published two editions in September 1811. The following year, a third edition was printed and distributed in the United States. The case was given the widest publicity possible and resulted in a reawakening of public interest in the cause of the enslaved across the empire. It was realised that the abolition of the slave trade did not bring an end to the abuse and misuse of the slaves in the British Empire and other drastic measures were needed to redress the situation. In particular, there was a need to be able

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<sup>16</sup> PP1810-11(254) Papers relating to the West Indies: Correspondence between the Earl of Liverpool and Governor Elliot in reference to the trial and execution of Arthur Hodge, for the murder of a Negro Slave. Liverpool to Elliot 20 June 1811. Folio no. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew, *The Hanging of Arthur Hodge*, 181-186.

to account for the existing slaves in the region while at the same time continuing the enforcement of the slave trade abolition act.<sup>18</sup>

McKeough's disclosure during the trial that he was instructed by Hodge to falsify the estate's records to show dead slaves as runaways and the subsequent destruction of the incriminating evidence, no doubt proved a powerful argument for James Stephen, who in 1812 suggested the need for a general registry of slaves. On 26 March 1812 a system of slave registration was implemented in Trinidad and extended to St Lucia in 1814. After a long and bitter struggle, all the colonies in the region, beginning with Barbados and Jamaica in 1816, eventually passed legislation establishing the slave registry act.<sup>19</sup> In the Virgin Islands, the Act came into law on 22 November 1817. The purpose of the law as stated was to: "ascertain the number and identifying the person of such slaves and that in order to ascertain their progress increase and decrease."<sup>20</sup> Under the provisions of the act, a registrar was appointed and an office established in Road Town. Unlike Trinidad which stipulated that the Slaves' Registrar should not be a slave owner, the Virgin Islands only required that the individual resided on the island of Tortola.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Slave Population**

The lives of the slaves in the British Caribbean were shaped, determined and governed by a colony's economy which was centred on a dominant crop. On Tortola the economy was based on sugar whereas the Cays focused primarily on cotton and livestock. While the principles of slavery and the organisation of the plantation system were the same across the region, the actions and interactions of the slaves within the individual

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<sup>18</sup> Charles H. Wesley, "The Neglected Period of Emancipation in Great Britain 1808-1823", *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 17, No.2, (1932), 165-168.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> PP1818 (433) 4, Further Papers Relating to the treatment of Slaves in the Colonies, Virgin Islands Slave Registration Act, (1818),99-122.

<sup>21</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 7 ; PP1818 (433) 4, Virgin Slave Registration Act, Clause No.1 (1818), 100.

societies resulted in demographic and other variations within and among different colonies. Barry Higman, in his research on the slave population in the British Caribbean, argued that the demographic structure of slaves can be used as an aid to gain an understanding of a slave society. Factors such as population density determine the extent not only to which slaves were able to communicate with each other, but also the possibility of establishing and supporting themselves through the use of provision grounds. Age distribution, sex ratios, and nationality (Creoles or African) of slaves directly affected issues such as fertility, mortality and the overarching factor of creolization. In this sense then, the demographic experience of the slave population reflects a continuous struggle for survival which was largely impacted by the material conditions of the slaves. Higman therefore concludes that the “demographic pattern provides a potential *index* of the nature of the slave society”, a fact that is supported through research by Michael Craton and others.<sup>22</sup> The Virgin Islands slave registers which cover the period 1818-1834 enable us to review the demographic structure of the slaves in the colony during the final decades of slavery in the British Caribbean. The initial register which was compiled during the period 20 February to 1 October 1818 represented a major transition, albeit enforced from above, in relation to the official recognition of the humanity of the enslaved. For the first time in the colony’s history, the demographic information of every enslaved person in the colony was entered into the official records of the colony. This was a major leap forward, as prior to the establishment of the slave registration process, the enumerations of the enslaved in the colony was conducted solely for taxation purposes (a head count) and did not even take into consideration differences in gender. In 1817, Andrew Anderson, President of the

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<sup>22</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 5, 39; Higman, “Slave Population of the British Caribbean: Some nineteenth-Century Variations in Caribbean Slave Society and economy,” in *A Student Reader*, ed. Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (London: James Curry Publishers, 1991), 221; Micheal Craton, *Searching for the Invisible man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Richard Dunn, “The Demographic Contrast between Slave Life in Jamaica and Virginia 1760 -1865”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol.151, No.1 (2007),43-60; John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad*.



Virgin Islands, in explaining the colony's inability to submit requested information with respect to the increases and decreases in the slave population by gender, stated that "it had not been found practicable" to collect such information as slaves were numerated only as means of taxation. In fact when there was no Tax Bill in force, as was the case in the period 1806 – 1808, no count was taken of the slaves in the colony.<sup>23</sup>

In this initial assessment of the slave population structure of the Virgin Islands, data extracted from the 1818 slave register will be used to establish a baseline against which to compare the changes, and developments in the Virgin Islands' slave society during the final decades of slavery. This was a period of great change in the region as a whole and this analysis will also take into consideration the changing attitudes of both the enslaved and the slave holders, as reflected in their interaction within the slave society. While the statistical data will inform the discussion by framing certain questions, qualitative data and information about the lives of the enslaved in the colony will provide the answers.

The 1818 slave register revealed that there was a total of 6,907 slaves in the Virgin Islands, a five per cent reduction in the total slave population after 1815. These figures reveal that the rate of decline in the slave population observed in the first eight years after the abolition of the slaves trade (7 slave per 1, 000 annually) had more than doubled (18 slave per 1,000 annually) in the three year prior to the registration of slaves in the colony. In the absence of specific statistical data we are unable to determine the specific cause of this rate of decline. While this decline might be attributed to deaths, there is also the possibility – as we will see in Chapter 3 – that the number of manumissions increased just prior to the registration of slaves. Higman was of the view

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<sup>23</sup>T71/370 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1818; CO 239/3 Letter from Andrew Anderson, President of the Virgin Islands, with enclosure, 3 February 1817.

that, while the abolition of the slave trade created an opportunity for the slave populations in the region to become stable and move towards levels of natural increase, the harshness of the regime under which the slaves worked still had a negative effect on their demographic survival.<sup>24</sup>

As part of our discussion thus far has focused on activities on the Belle Vue Estate, it is only fitting that the slave population on that property in 1818 be examined. After the death of Arthur Hodge, the Belle Vue Estate was inherited by his son Henry Cecil Hodge who at the time was under the age of ten years. In 1818 the estate was managed by Bezaliel Chalwill who submitted a registration form showing that there was a total of 71 slaves on the estate. This figure indicates a major decline as there were 130 slaves in Hodge's possession in 1803.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 1.4** Slave Population Distributions , Belle Vue Estate, 1818.

<b>Age</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>0-4</b>	7	1	<b>8</b>
<b>5-9</b>	4	0	<b>4</b>
<b>10-14</b>	0	2	<b>2</b>
<b>15-19</b>	3	6	<b>9</b>
<b>20-24</b>	12	4	<b>16</b>
<b>25-29</b>	4	5	<b>9</b>
<b>30-34</b>	5	4	<b>9</b>
<b>35-39</b>	1	5	<b>6</b>
<b>40-44</b>	0	5	<b>5</b>
<b>45+</b>	0	3	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>71</b>

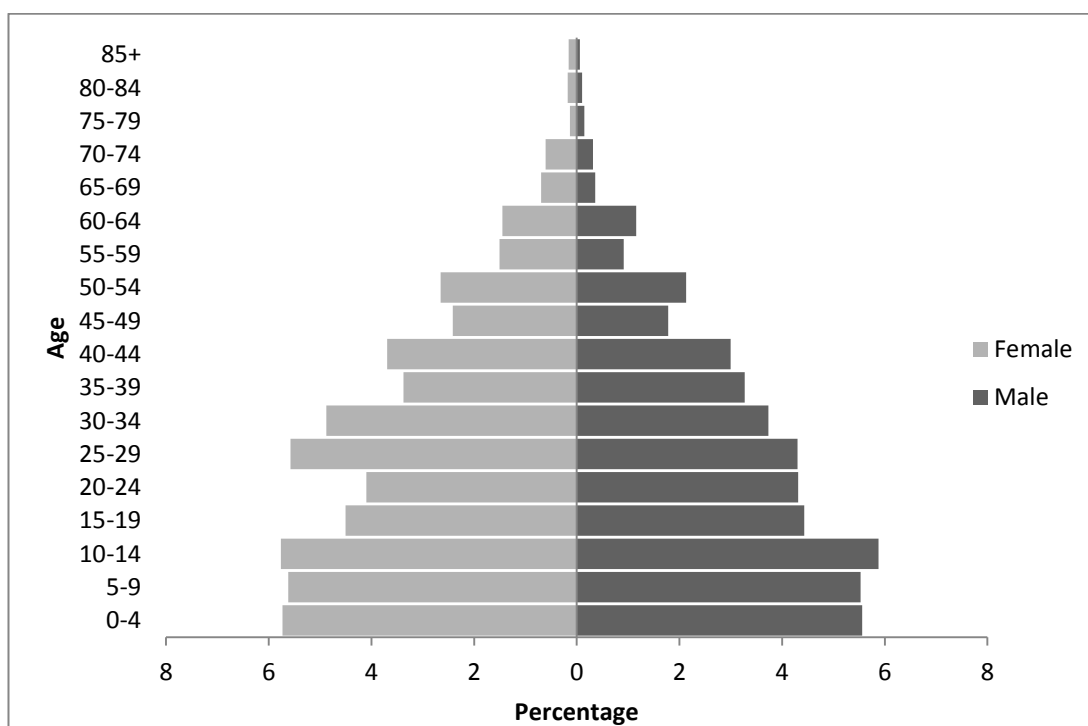
Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

A demographic analysis of the slave population on the Belle Vue Estate revealed that there were an almost equal numbers of males and females. The average age of the slaves

<sup>24</sup> T71/370 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1818; Higman, *Slave Population*, 1-5.

<sup>25</sup> T71/370 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1818; Belisario, *Trial of Arthur Hodge*.

on the estate was 23 years and, while there were a few women over the age of 45 years there were no men over the age of 39 years. The slaves in the prime working group (age 15- 44) made up 76.4 per cent of the total slave population on the estate. Males in the prime working group – more than half of whom were between the ages of 20 - 24 – slightly outnumbered females. Among the children under the age of 14 there was a ratio of about five males to every female. Additionally 25 per cent of the slaves on the Belle Vue Estate were African born, the majority of whom were male and under the age of 34. Considering that the slave trade ended 11 years prior, these individuals would have been under the age of 20 or even as young as 8 years when they were transported to the Caribbean. Lastly, the only coloured slaves on the estate were two children, both were boys under the age of 9 years (Table 1.4).<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 1.4** Virgin Islands Slave Population Pyramid 1818 , The Virgin Islands Slave Database.

<sup>26</sup> T71/370 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1818.

Figure 1.4 above gives a pictorial view of the spread of the slave population in the Virgin Islands in 1818, eleven years after the closure of the slave trade. On a regional level, the structure and spread of the Virgin Islands slave populations as shown, closely resembles the average population of the first-phase sugar colonies in the British Caribbean which also comprises the Virgin Islands. Furthermore, the demographic structure of the slave population in the Virgin Islands was almost similar to the demographic structure of the slave population in St. Kitts for the year 1817. Thus by 1818 the slave population in the Virgin Islands, as with other slave populations in the region, was reflecting the signs of transition from a volatile, shifting population to a more stable and adjusted population. These are in fact interesting and encouraging developments that speak volumes for the slave society as a whole and warrants further, in-depth analysis to determine the internal dynamics that were affecting or guiding this transition.<sup>27</sup>

One of the first characteristics of the Virgin Islands slave population that is revealed by the 1818 slave register is the fact that 3,245 or 47 per cent of the general slave population was male as opposed to 3,662 or 53 per cent who were females. Thus by 1818, the level and range of transition in the slave population in the Virgin Islands was far reaching, as it was generally accepted that the majority of slaves in the region throughout the period while the slave trade was in progress, were males. For example, on the Codrington Estate in Barbados in 1781, 53 per cent of the slave population was male as opposed to 47 per cent who were female. This early ratio in favour of males reflected the general preference of planters for young male slaves, whom they felt were more suitable to the rigours of plantation work. Shipments of African slaves in the region were said to have comprised a ratio of three males to every two females and

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<sup>27</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 135-147; Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man*, 60-61

during the last year of the slave trade it was estimated that more than 60 per cent of the slaves imported into Jamaica were males.<sup>28</sup>

The higher ratio of females to males (88 males to every 100 females) in the Virgin Islands slave population in 1818, was also seen to varying degrees among other slave populations in the British Caribbean, especially among the first phase sugar colonies. In Barbados where the slave population had reached equal proportions of males and females before the middle of the eighteenth century, in 1817 there were 83.9 males per 100 females. Nevis, on the other hand, in 1817 had a slave population that was almost balanced with 95 males to every 100 females. This demographic transition which also reflects other underlying changes became a feature of slave societies in the British Caribbean during the final decades of slavery.<sup>29</sup>

The men, women and children that made up the slave population in the British Caribbean were first and foremost in the eyes of the slave-holders, a labour source. The daily experiences of these individuals evolved and centred on their work which, as was stated earlier, was determined by the dominant crop. In 1815, about 63 per cent of the slave population in the Virgin Islands was attached to sugar estates. If this percentage is rounded up to 65 per cent to make accommodation for the possible retrenchment of slaves within the colonies from non-sugar producing areas to sugar producing area, as discussed earlier, the estimated number of slaves in the colony attached to sugar estates in 1818 was about 4500. As Tortola was the established sugar island within the Virgin

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<sup>28</sup>T71/370 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1818; J. Harry Bennett, *Bondsmen and Bishops Slavery and Apprenticeship on the Codrington Plantation of Barbados 1710-1838* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 12; Higman, *Slave Population*, 71-72; Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 224; Phillip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 19; Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen The Negro in the Americas* (New York; Vintage Books, 1946), 36-37

<sup>29</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 116.

Islands, it stands to reason that any discussion on the impact of sugar production on the colony's slave population must focus on the slave population on that island.<sup>30</sup>

The Virgin Islands' slave population statistics for 1818 indicate that a total of 5,343 slaves, or 77 per cent of the number of slaves in the colony, lived on the island of Tortola. Thus, based on the estimated number of enslaved individuals in the colony attached to sugar estates, the lives of about 84 per cent of Tortola's slave population was directly impacted by the seasonal cycle of the sugar cane. Like their ancestors before them, these individuals worked on Tortola's ridges and valleys, cultivating sugar cane to enrich the island's slaveholders. Michael Craton observed that throughout the period of slavery the 'sugar technology' – that is the method of cultivation and the management techniques used in the British Caribbean – did not change much. As was the case during the early seventeenth century, as during the 1800s, field workers on sugar estates were organised into gangs which represented an order of importance with respect to the work they were required to carry out. In particular, Craton was of the opinion that in spite of continuous and extensive application of the gang system, that it was in fact 'the least effective way' to organise field labour as the system did not achieve maximum output from the energies expended. Craton argues that a task system would have in fact been more beneficial to the enslaved as well as to the slave holders.<sup>31</sup>

In the Virgin Islands, the records revealed that the gang system was still being used to organise workers on the sugar estates on Tortola during the final decades of slavery. In 1823, 90 slaves on a sugar estate located in the South Western Division of Tortola were grouped as follows: First gang (38 slaves), Second Gang (29 slaves), Third gang (16

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<sup>30</sup> C.O. 239/9 Stabo Statistics.

<sup>31</sup> T71/370 Virgin Slave Register 1818; Justin Roberts, "Working between the lines Labour and Agriculture on Two Barbadian Sugar Plantations 1796-97," *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series Vol. LXIII No. 3, (2006), 559; Micheal Craton, "Slavery and Slave Society in the British Caribbean," in *The Slavery Reader*, ed. Gad Heuman and James Walvin (London: Routledge, 2003), 108; Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man*, 1;

slaves) and infants (6 slaves). On another estate which was one mile from Road Town there were 89 enslaved individuals. The classification was: First gang (30 slaves), Second and Third gang (40 slaves) and the play gang and infants (20 slaves). On both of these properties the first gang comprised over 40 per cent of the main work force (that is minus the infants and play gang) thereby underscoring their importance to the operation of the particular slave holders. This group was supported by the second gang, which in most cases undertook the same work but attended primarily to the slightly less demanding tasks. On the Codrington Estate in Barbados during the 1700s the first gang made up 53 per cent of the field workers and on the Peruvian Vale Estate in St. Vincent in the early 1800s the allocation to the first gang ranged from about 32 to 43 per cent of the field workers.<sup>32</sup>

On sugar estates in the British Caribbean, the first gang comprised slaves that were in the prime of their strength and between the ages of about 19 to 44 years old. The second gang on the other hand, consisted of adolescents and those slaves over the age of 40 whose strength was beginning to wane. It was standard for women to make up the majority in the first gang which was responsible for the most taxing work of the sugar estate: digging cane holes and cutting the sugar cane. For example, on Mesopotamia Estate in Jamaica, 85 per cent of the prime field workers responsible for the hardest work on the estate were women. Similarly, on Newton Estate in Barbados the majority of the field workers were women who worked side by side with men.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> PP1826 (81) Slave Trade, Papers Relating to Captured Negroes, Second Part of Major Moody Report (1826), 102-105; Bennett, *Bondsmen and Bishops*, 11; Higman, *Slave Population*, 186.

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, "Working Between the Lines," 559; Richard Dunn, "'Dreadful Idlers' in the Cane Fields: The Slave Labour Patterns on a Jamaican Sugar Estate 1762- 1831," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 17:4, ( 1987), 795-822.

## **The Slave Population on Tortola**

On Tortola, in 1818, 54 per cent of the total enslaved population were women while the remaining 46 per cent were men. While 34 per cent of the women on the island were between the ages of 20 to 39 – workers in their prime – the percentage of the men in the similar age range was also 34 per cent. The adolescents who formed part of the second gang were just over eight per cent of the total population. Further, those individuals aged 40 and above who, because of declining strength were demoted to the second gang where they continued to work according to the level of their strength, made up under 20 per cent of the enslaved population on the island. Children under the age of 14 made up in excess of 30 per cent of the slave population on the islands. It was from this group that the third gang was formed and they generally worked under the supervision of an elderly woman, who was responsible for training them in the discipline of work. Their tasks included light work such as collecting grass for animals and weeding around the young sugar cane plants (Table 1.5).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 167. Craton, *Sinews of Empire*, 124; Roberts, *Working Between the Lines*, 571-572; Jerome Teelucksing, "The 'Invisible Child' in British West Indian Slavery," *Slavery and Abolition* 27:2 (2006), 243.



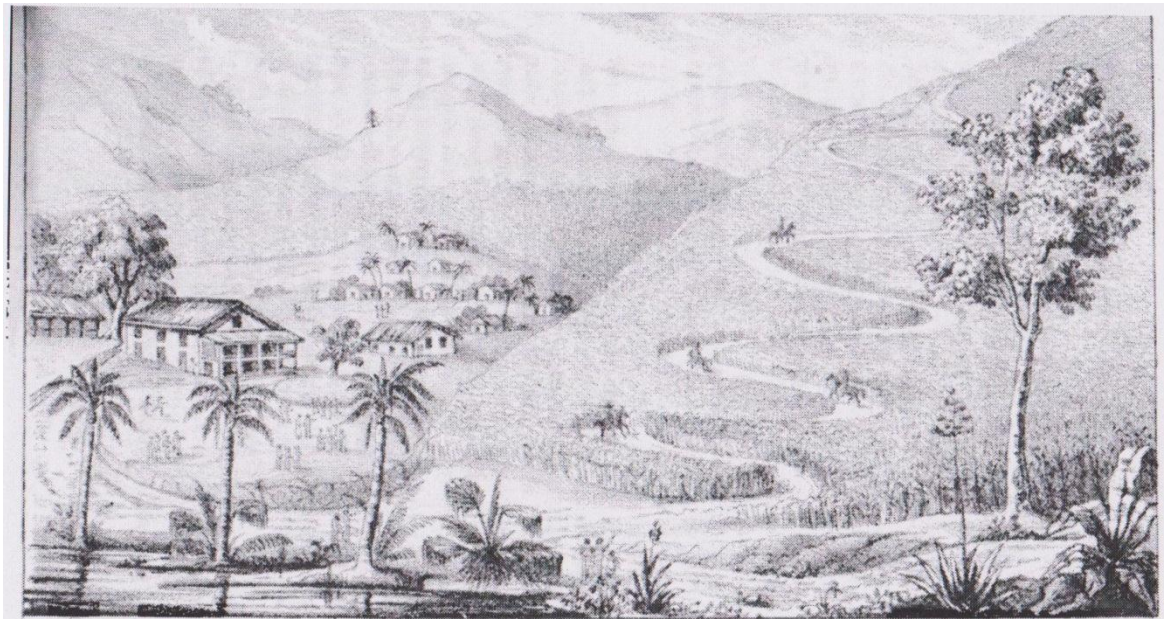
**Table 1.5** Tortola Slave Population Percentages, 1818.

<b>Age</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>0-4</b>	11.48	9.93	<b>10.65</b>
<b>5-9</b>	12.12	10.28	<b>11.14</b>
<b>10-14</b>	11.28	10.35	<b>10.78</b>
<b>15-19</b>	8.78	8.18	<b>8.46</b>
<b>20-24</b>	9.38	7.48	<b>8.37</b>
<b>25-29</b>	9.30	10.94	<b>10.18</b>
<b>30-34</b>	7.77	9.51	<b>8.70</b>
<b>35-39</b>	7.49	6.22	<b>6.81</b>
<b>40-44</b>	6.32	7.10	<b>6.74</b>
<b>45-49</b>	4.11	5.03	<b>4.60</b>
<b>50-54</b>	5.20	5.38	<b>5.30</b>
<b>55-59</b>	1.89	2.90	<b>2.43</b>
<b>60-64</b>	2.54	3.04	<b>2.81</b>
<b>65-69</b>	0.89	1.43	<b>1.18</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.81	1.33	<b>1.09</b>
<b>75-79</b>	0.32	0.17	<b>0.24</b>
<b>80-84</b>	0.16	0.38	<b>0.28</b>
<b>85+</b>	0.16	0.31	<b>0.24</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

On sugar estates, there was a small percentage of the enslaved who were exempted from work. These included the infants and the aged and disabled. On Tortola, the enslaved over the age of 65, who in most cases were broken by years of hard work, made up 3.03 per cent of the slave population. In the case of old Wawski and Quamina, an aged couple who were long past their usefulness to their former holder, were allowed to live on the property where they had worked for over 50 years. For their subsistence, Quamina had a plot of land beside their hut in which he planted ground provisions. There were other cases, however, where the elderly were not afforded any kind of assistance or support, even when sick, from their former owners who saw them as

burdens. One missionary describing the desperate conditions of these supernumeraries wrote ‘in sickness there they may lie and die’ without the benefit of medical care.<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 1.5** Pleasant Valley Estate, Tortola, George Truman, John Jackson, and Thos. B. Longstreth, *Narrative of the a Visit to the West Indies, 1840 – 1841* (Philadelphia 1844), 40.5.

The terrain of the Tortola posed some specific challenges for the enslaved working on the sugar estates. As there was little flat land, the majority of the sugar cane had to be cultivated on the sometimes steep hillsides. Figure 1.5, which is a sketch of the Pleasant Valley Estate on Tortola, shows the hillside covered with sugar cane, and the main buildings on the estate and houses for the enslaved in the valley below. In preparing the soil to plant the sugar cane – which was propagated from the plants that were harvested – a form of contour ploughing was done on the hillside slopes. This method of holing was similar to the cross-holing that was done on flat lands as it also utilized the hoe. As opposed to the banks of soil that were formed into parallel ridges utilizing the cross-holing method, on the hillsides on Tortola continuous rows of horizontal layers of dirt were formed based on the gradient of the land. These

<sup>35</sup> Letters from the Virgin Islands, 149-150; MMS West Indies Correspondence, Abraham Whitehouse, 20 August 1814.

embankments were supported by 'rude walls' made from stones gathered by the slaves and sometimes carried up the hills on their heads. Additionally, manure was added to the soil and water had to be carried up the hills by the slaves in very much the same manner.<sup>36</sup>

Roberts, in a recent research published on the Newton and Seawall Estates on Barbados, discovered that contrary to popular belief, the slave gangs on those estates did not always work in 'highly regimented and closely supervised rows.' In fact members of gangs were at times involved in carrying out different activities. In particular, Roberts found that while field hands were the most important workers on the estates, some of them functioned in dual roles, especially during the period of harvest which was very intense and lasted for about two months. In particular Higman points out that most of routine manual labour in the sugar factories was done by the field labourers who were organised in shift system that also included their field work.<sup>37</sup>

On Tortola, given the size of the estates and the seasonal demands of the crop, it is highly likely that the slaves also functioned in dual roles, especially during crop time. However, unlike the Newton and Seawall Estates where harvesting lasted for two months, on Tortola, the process of harvesting and processing the sugar cane lasted for about seven months, from January to July. Several visitors to the Virgin Islands during the 1800s described sugar estates as being a 'bustle of activity' during the period of harvest. On one estate there were said to be about 50 to 60 men and women cutting cane on an incline plain and the cane was tied into bundles and dropped into a shoot or wooden trough which conveyed them down the hill. Another interesting feature of sugar

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<sup>36</sup> Trelawney Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book* Vol. 1, (London: 1834) , 145, 277; George Truman, John Jackson, and Thomas B. Longstreth , *Narrative of a Visit to the West Indies in 1840 and 1841* (Philadelphia:1841), 27; Higman, *Slave Population*, 162-166.

<sup>37</sup> Justin Roberts, "Working Between the Lines," 557-559; Higman, *Slave Population*, 161-167.

estates on Tortola was that because the sugar cane was planted on the hills and the sugar works were in the valleys below special channels or troughs were built in a direct line down the hill towards the mills. These troughs were said to have crossed the zigzag bridle paths, as can be seen in Figure 1.5 that led to the top of the hills, thus making it dangerous to walk or ride in those areas when the cane was being propelled downwards. In fact, there were reports of persons who had lost an arm or leg after being impaled by a piece of sugar cane that was dislodged from the bundle in which it was tied.<sup>38</sup>

At the bottom of the trough, the young boys who collected the bundles and loaded them onto a cart drawn by oxen to convey them to the mill, had to carefully avoid the loose pieces of cane that rebounded into the air on impact. These adolescents, who were part of the second gang, worked the carts to and from the mill all day carrying the cane, while another group was responsible for passing cane from the spot where they were deposited by the carts to the women who fed the roller. The mules or cattle that worked the mill were also kept at a steady pace by some young boys who were assigned that task. Additionally, the children and the older people, some of whom were superannuated, were also involved in spreading magoss (the crushed cane) in the sun to dry and at the same time collecting that which was already dried and packing it under a shed next to the boiling house. At the boiling house, two or three adults stationed at the furnace followed the instructions of the head boiler who required them to keep the furnace going using the dried magoss. Inside the boiling house where the temperature was exceedingly high, some slaves worked removing scum that constantly rose to the surface of the boiling sugar cane juice and transferring the boiling juice from one copper to another. While this atmosphere was considered uncomfortable, it was rated as

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<sup>38</sup> *Letters from the Virgin Islands*, 63-147; Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 163-169; Roberts, "Working Between the Lines", 564.

healthier than the distillery where the excess syrup from the raw sugar was processed into rum for local consumption as well as export.<sup>39</sup>

In the British Caribbean the process of harvesting the sugar cane had to be timed so as to insure that the maximum amount of sugar was obtained from each crop. Once the cane was cut, it had to be quickly processed before the quality of its sugar content began to drop. As a result, during harvesting slaves worked day and night for months until all the crop was taken in. In the Virgin Islands, this perishable nature of the sugar cane led estate owners to limit the amount of sugar cane that was cut in any one day to what could be processed both by the mill and boiling house. It was estimated that 16 hours of work at the mill and the boiling house were required to produce one hogshead of sugar. In emergencies when there was breakdown of equipment, it was necessary for the work to continue for seven days a week so as to insure that the sugar was ready for shipment by the appointed time.<sup>40</sup>

Generally, in the British Caribbean, shipping of the season's produce occurred during the month of July and before the first of August which was considered the commencement of the hurricane season in the region. The sugar was shipped in casks or hogsheads which had to be made on the estate by skilled individuals referred to as Coopers. Coopers were among the skilled slave artisans which included carpenters, boilers, seamen, domestics and many others. These skilled positions represented promotional outlets that were available to slaves to escape the harshness of field work. However, it was observed that while women comprised more than half of the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Berlin and Morgan, ed. *Cultivation and Culture*, 9; *Letters from the Virgin Islands*, 64.

population, they were discriminated against with respects to promotional outlets on sugar estates.<sup>41</sup>

The majority of the skills and leadership positions on the estate were open to men while very few were available to women. For example, while men who worked as field hands could be promoted to leadership positions such as drivers, boilers, stock keepers and watchmen, when women got older, they were merely assigned less strenuous field work. In short, it was found that while men were generally retired from the fields at about age 34 and assigned other duties, women still had to endure the demanding tasks of cane holing, planting and cutting cane until they were over the age of 40. One of the positions that men frequently found themselves assigned to when their strength began to fail was that of watchmen. In this position, these individuals helped to maintain a level of security and vigilance on the estates, guarding the sugar cane from theft and or destruction by animals or, at times fire. The watchmen built makeshift huts at strategic points in the cane field where they spent the night with a fire to keep them warm during cold nights. On one estate in the hills of Tortola, a group of travellers in the 1820s met an old man who was complaining because he was given several lashes for his lack of vigilance which resulted in some of the cane he was watching being stolen by a group of juveniles.<sup>42</sup>

Earlier in this chapter it was observed that the white population in the Virgin Islands was steadily declining. As a result, many of the skills and leadership positions on the sugar estate were opened to the enslaved who were trained through apprenticeships.

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<sup>41</sup> For more details on the issue of women work and levels of discrimination, on sugar estates see Michael Craton and James Walvin, *A Jamaican Plantation: The History of Worthy Park 1670 – 1970*, (London: W. H. Allen, 1970), 140.

<sup>42</sup> Lorena Walsh, “Work and the Slave Economy” in *The Routledge History of Slavery*, ed. Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (London Routledge, 2011), 108-110; Craton and Walvin, *A Jamaica Plantation*, 138-140; David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and Abolition, 1783 – 1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), 149; Roberts, “Working Between the Lines”, 27.

This transition in the occupation status of the enslaved in the Virgin Islands even extended to the management realm of overseer. Rev. Brownell, a Methodist missionary who served in the Virgin Islands in the early 1800s, reported that the enslaved in the colony were given positions of trust by slave holders and this even included being assigned as overseers on estate – a position which was normally held by white persons. In the 1820s, a Colonial Office appointed official who visited the Virgin Islands wrote that while he could not detect any error in the accounts of a certain estate presented to him, he did not place much confidence in them because the owner did not employ any white persons to assist him, and as a result the estate was run entirely by the slaves with an overseer selected from among them. This practice seemed to have been well established on many of the estates, as the Baptismal Records for children compiled by the Methodist missionaries for the period 1824-1831 list a total of 10 fathers from among the enslaved population who were overseers. More specifically, the overseer on the Johnson Ghut Estate in 1831 was a 49 year old enslaved individual by the name of William Hetherington.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Slave Population on the Cays**

The Cays which comprised the non-sugar producing sector of the Virgin Islands economy had a population of 1,564 or 23 per cent of the total number of slaves in the colony. Unlike on the island of Tortola, on the Cays, 51 per cent of the total enslaved population were females and the remaining 49 per cent male. For those who resided on these scattered small islands or cays, the main economic foci were cotton, livestock and fishing. In addition to these main areas, other activities included the planting of provisions, salt raking and salvaging of wrecks. Technically, the range of economic

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<sup>43</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831 Folio no. 65 enclosure no.1 Testimony of Thomas Caines; PP1826 (81) Second Part of Major Moody's Report relating to captured Negroes 24 February 1826 p.101-105; Virgin Islands Methodist Archive [VIMA] Baptismal Records 1824-1831.

activities and self sufficiency of the Cays closely reflected the economic diversity of the marginal colonies in the region and also the pens in Jamaica.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 1.6** The Cays, Slave Population Percentages, 1818.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	12.99	13.97	<b>13.49</b>
<b>5-9</b>	10.63	11.72	<b>11.19</b>
<b>10-14</b>	16.54	12.72	<b>14.58</b>
<b>15-19</b>	11.55	9.60	<b>10.55</b>
<b>20-24</b>	8.53	8.60	<b>8.57</b>
<b>25-29</b>	8.66	8.98	<b>8.82</b>
<b>30-34</b>	8.53	8.10	<b>8.31</b>
<b>35-39</b>	5.25	6.86	<b>6.07</b>
<b>40-44</b>	6.56	6.48	<b>6.52</b>
<b>45-49</b>	2.76	2.87	<b>2.81</b>
<b>50-54</b>	2.36	3.62	<b>3.01</b>
<b>55-59</b>	2.10	2.62	<b>2.37</b>
<b>60-64</b>	2.23	1.62	<b>1.92</b>
<b>65-69</b>	0.39	0.87	<b>0.64</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.26	0.50	<b>0.38</b>
<b>75-79</b>	0.26	0.50	<b>0.38</b>
<b>80+</b>	0.39	0.37	<b>0.38</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

As with all slave communities, the life of the enslaved on the Cays in the Virgin Islands revolved around their work. Among the enslaved population, 31.7 per cent of the total numbers were in the prime of their working strength (age 20 – 39). This figure, which almost represented the sexes equally, was slightly lower than on Tortola where there was a greater demand for workers in this area to support the difficult work on the sugar estates. The enslaved on the Cays who were old, or supernumerary, over the age of 40

<sup>44</sup> T71/370 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1818; C.O. 239/9 Stabo Statistics; For a description of the marginal colonies and the pens in Jamaica see Verene A. Shepherd, "Alternative Husbandry: Slaves and Free Labourers on Livestock Farms in Jamaica in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Slavery and Abolition, Special Issue The Wages of Slavery From Chattel Slavery to Wage Labour in Africa, the Caribbean and England*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1993), 41-66; Micheal Craton and D. Gail Saunders, "On Slavery's Margin: The Farquharson Estate, San Salvador, Bahamas 1831-1832," *Slavery and Abolition Vol.12, No.2*, (1991), 49-72.



years made up 18 per cent of the total population, while children under the age of 14 comprised 39 per cent of the total population. The interesting shift here, is that while the percentage of the ageing population on the Cays was lower than on Tortola, the percentage of children was much higher. As a result of these variations, the enslaved population on the Cays, with an average age of 22, was slightly younger than the population on Tortola where the average age of 26 years (Tables 1.5 and 1.6).

The wide range of economic activities and the relatively small size of the enslaved population on the small islands that comprised the Cays meant that all of the enslaved, regardless of age, were involved in some aspect of work. In the Bahamas, where the economic focus was similar to that of the Cays in the Virgin Islands, the task system was used as a means to manage the labour of the enslaved. Work was assigned based on specific jobs relative to the individual's strength and ability, with the incentive of free time if work was completed early. The process of preparing the soil to plant cotton and provisions was almost similar to that which was required for planting sugar cane, in that the same hand tool, the hoe, was used. Careful attention had to be paid to the young crop, which meant removing weeds and in the case of cotton, pruning the plants. During periods of planting and harvesting, however, extra work was required but special incentives or rewards were also given.<sup>45</sup>

As in the case of Tortola, life on the Cays was also dictated to a large extent by the season of the crops or other work cycles. Cotton was the main cash crop and there were two planting seasons (March and between May and September) and two harvesting seasons – winter and spring. A considerable amount of time was also allocated to processing the cotton in preparation for shipping. It should be noted that this was

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<sup>45</sup>Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, "On Slavery's Margin," 55-56,59; D. Gail Saunders, "Slave life, Slave Society and Cotton Production in the Bahamas," *Slavery and Abolition Vol.11, No. 31*, (1990), 335-339.

nothing compared to the processing required for the preparation of sugar for shipping. In addition to these seasonal activities, the keeping of livestock was a year round commitment which was intensified when there were periods of drought, as food and water had to be found to maintain the animals. As on the sugar estate, work in the non-sugar sector was not generally gender specific. However, on the Vineyard pen in Jamaica, it was found that women's work with livestock tended to be limited to small domestic animals.<sup>46</sup>

On Anegada – which is the most northern of the islands in the Virgin Islands and is surrounded almost entirely by a natural barrier of reefs and shoals commonly referred to as the Horse-shoe Reef – salvaging wrecked vessels was as important as other ventures in agriculture and fishing. It was estimated that, on an average, about twenty ships per year ran aground on the reefs providing a ready source of income for the residents.<sup>47</sup> In 1818, there was a total of 111 slaves on Anegada of whom 56 per cent were female and 44 per cent male. On this island where the average age of the slave population was 20 years, 39.6 per cent of the total population was in the prime age group of 20 – 39 years of age. About 52 per cent of workers in the prime age group category were males, the highest percentage on the Cays or in the Virgin Islands as a whole. Considering the isolated nature of Anegada and the marine focus of its economy on fishing and salvaging, the large number of males in the enslaved population seems quite natural (Table 1.7).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid; see Verene A. Shepherd, "Alternative Husbandry", 41-66.

<sup>47</sup> *The Journal of the Royal Geographic Society London* Vol. 11 (1831-1832), 153-154

<sup>48</sup> C.O.239/ Stabo Statistics, T71/371 Virgin Island Slave Register.

**Table 1.7** Anegada Slave Population Percentages, 1818.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	6.25	17.46	<b>12.61</b>
<b>5-9</b>	12.50	9.52	<b>10.81</b>
<b>10-14</b>	14.58	12.70	<b>13.51</b>
<b>15-19</b>	12.50	14.29	<b>13.51</b>
<b>20-24</b>	12.50	12.70	<b>12.61</b>
<b>25-29</b>	8.33	11.11	<b>9.91</b>
<b>30-34</b>	18.75	9.52	<b>13.51</b>
<b>35-39</b>	8.33	0.00	<b>3.60</b>
<b>40-44</b>	2.08	7.94	<b>5.41</b>
<b>45-49</b>	0.00	3.17	<b>1.80</b>
<b>50+</b>	4.17	1.59	<b>2.70</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

While life on Anegada moved at a slow pace, the demise of a passing vessel on the reef propelled the community into a flurry of activity. An alarm would be sounded on the island alerting residents and rousing them to action. In immediate response to the sound, all able bodied residents on the island, using all description and size of boats, hurriedly made their way to the endangered vessel. With much skill and dexterity the experienced seamen competed with each other to be first on the deck of the wreck. One writer, in relating this process said: “The scene indeed, baffles description and it is to be feared that few are attracted by motives of humanity.” One such operation in 1811 which involved the rescue of the crew and cargo of a slave ship, the Donna Paula, netted about 8,050 dollars to the salvagers on the island.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Journal Royal Geographic Society, 153-154; Anon., A Picture of Negro Slavery Drawn by the Colonist Themselves (1825), 123; C.O.239/9 Stabo Statistics.

One of the interesting features of the Cays is the fact that the enslaved on some of the islands were unsupervised, with no free white or coloured individuals living on the islands with them. On Great Thatch Island, there were four such enslaved individuals in 1815. They were responsible for a large herd of cattle and other livestock including chickens. Nine acres of cotton and ground provisions were planted and an estimated catch of 1,600 pounds of fish were landed in 1815. No doubt the experiences of the slaves on Great Thatch Island were similar to that of slaves on Exuma Islands in the Bahamas who researchers discovered “benefitted from the virtual absence of white supervisors.” The range of activities and production with respect to slaves on Great Thatch Island compared favourably to that on the island of Spanish Town, the largest non-sugar producing island among the Cays. Spanish Town had a population of 517 slaves and 232 whites and free coloureds. The island’s estimated export value for 1815 was £1, 215. This export was based on the cultivation of 145 acres of cotton, 230 acres of produce and the use of 6,500 acres of pasture land. The pasture lands in particular supported over 200 heads of cattle and a total of 1,517 sheep, goats and pigs. The number of poultry kept stood at 3,695 and the estimated catch of fish was 269,696 pounds.<sup>50</sup>

Salt raking was also undertaken by the enslaved on the Cays but this activity was confined to the islands of Anegada and Salt Island. These two islands had a total of 691 acres of salt pond, producing 7,630 bushels or 97,664 cubic feet of salt in 1815.<sup>51</sup> While Anegada had the largest capacity for salt production with over 600 acres of salt ponds or 95% of the total capacity, the island produced about 55% of the colony’s salt. Salt Island on the other hand with 23 acres of salt pond, proved to be the most productive with an output of 3,300 bushels or 4,224 cubic feet of salt in 1815. The work of

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<sup>50</sup>Craton and Saunders, “On Slavery’s Margin,” 49-72; C.O. 239/9 Stabo Statistics.

<sup>51</sup> A bushel is a unit of dry measure equivalent to 1.28 cubic foot.

gathering salt was no doubt the responsibility of some of the slaves on the islands who in addition engaged in other pursuits during the rest of the year. According to Mary Prince, who resided in Turks and Caicos, salt raking was very taxing work, beginning at four in the morning with a break at 9am for breakfast, which had to be hastily eaten. No time was lost as the slaves worked through the heat of the day for days on end to gather the salt before the rain came. Following a lunch break at 12 noon, work resumed until night. Because of the prolonged period of time slaves spent in the salt ponds, they developed sores on their feet and legs which were very painful and reduced their level of effectiveness. Sometimes at night, the work continued as the slaves were required to measure salt in preparation for shipping.<sup>52</sup>

On the Cays, in addition to the activities named above there was also a heavy focus on raising livestock. These activities all had seasonal aspects with times of heavy demand, but could not be compared to the process of sugar production which was conducted on Tortola. Thus the life experience of the enslaved on the Cays was not as rigid as that which was experienced by their counterparts on Tortola.<sup>53</sup>

### **Social and Cultural life**

The lives of the enslaved in the British Caribbean were influenced and guided by the economy and as the creole population increased a new and evolving culture emerged. Thus throughout the period of slavery in the region the enslaved adapted to their environment, incorporating their cultural experiences of the past to enable them to survive. Even after 1807 when the majority of the slave population were increasingly creole born, the influence of African culture on their lives was still evident. Through their interaction with each other and members of the wider slave society, the enslaved

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<sup>52</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, (London: Penguin Group 2000), 18-22; C.O.239/9 Stabo Statistics.

<sup>53</sup> Shepherd, "Alternative Husbandry", 41-66.

were able to develop their social and cultural life within the confines of slavery. The primary social institution of the slaves was the family, which was always under constant threat because of the ideologies of the system of slavery. As slaves were seen as property they were sold and relocated without regards to family structure.<sup>54</sup>

By the early 1800s the majority of slaves in the region lived in family settings, which at times comprised a mother and her children. On the Mount Healthy Estate on Tortola, visitors in the early 1800s found that the slave village was an extension of the family unit with elderly and superannuated slaves caring for young children and preparing meals while relatives went to work. The village setting was described as having a ‘rustic beauty’ and ‘regarded as one of those calm secluded spots of primitive life and simplicity.’ The houses in the village were about 10 to 15 feet apart with a range of fruit trees and other plants growing between them. The construction style was considered very simple as the majority of the houses comprised two rooms about eight or ten feet squared and was built from wood. The roofs were thatched with the leaves from the sugar canes and the floor was primarily dirt. It was also observed that some of the houses were built from stones. The furnishing in the slave houses was very basic: a table with a few culinary utensils and a couch, but there was no bedstead. This description closely fits that given of slave villages in Jamaica, where it was also noted that as time went on more advanced methods and types of material were used to build houses.<sup>55</sup>

The extended family system of the slave society was also seen at the Mount Healthy Estate when the women gathered to collect their weekly rations of provisions that were

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<sup>54</sup> Goevia, *Slave Society*, vii; Michael Craton, *Sinews of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), 105, 157-158; Morgan, “Slavery in the British Caribbean”, 389-398.

<sup>55</sup> Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 158-161; Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770- 1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 234-237.

issued by the estate's manager. In what could be considered a social setting the women were seated in various locations on patches of grass or in the shade of a nearby building chatting and laughing. At some level it seemed that the collection of the rations was secondary, as the manager had to encourage them to be quiet so they could hear when their names were called. Even after individuals collected their supplies they did not leave, but returned to where they had been seated and continued to interact with their colleagues. One visitor, observing the transaction, commented that some of the women collected rations for those individuals who were sick or aged and were unable to collect supplies for themselves. The rations of flour, cornmeal and salt fish which were supplied to the enslaved in the colony formed the basis of their diet, but were heavily supplemented by food from their provision grounds (the issue of provision grounds will be examined in detail in Chapter 4), pastures and fishing.<sup>56</sup>

Over time the slaves developed their own culinary styles which at times were adopted by the white community. In the Virgin Islands the slaves' practise of eating cold fried fish drizzled with vinegar that was steeped in a mixture of peppers and garlic, was found to be particularly pleasing to visitors. The black guavaberry which is indigenous to the Virgin Islands was used by the slaves to make a special beverage. When preserved these berries were also used by the white population as a substitute for English currents. This infusion of the slaves' culture into the culture of the slave society was found to be a standard occurrence in the wider British Caribbean. In particular, the white population ate food that was prepared based on African influence.<sup>57</sup>

Music and dancing were also very important in the lives of the enslaved in the British Caribbean, they served as recreational outlets and had functional uses. Based on African

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<sup>56</sup> Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 223-224; Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 162-168.

<sup>57</sup> Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 247; Anon., *Letters from the Virgin Islands*, 148; Morgan, "Slavery in the British Caribbean", 392.

tradition, songs were developed using the system of call and response. In some cases these songs were referred to as work songs since they were used to help the members of a gang work together based on the rhythm of the song. In the early 1800s a group of boatmen ferrying passengers from Tortola to St Thomas in a row boat, sung the following song.

Hur-ra my jolly boy,  
*Fine tine o' day,*  
We pull for St. Thomas boys,  
*Fine tine o' day,*  
Nancy Gibbs and Betsy Braid,  
*Fine tine o' day,*  
Massa cum fra London town,  
*Fine time o' day,*  
Massa is a handsome man,  
*Fine time o' day,*  
Massa is a dandy man,  
*Fine time o' day,*  
Him hab de dollar, plenty too,  
*Fine time o' day,*  
Massa lub a pretty girl,  
*Fine time o' day,*  
Him lub her much, him lub 'em true,  
*Fine time o' day,*  
Him hunt her round the guaba bush  
*Fine time o' day*  
Him catch 'em in de cane piece,  
*Fine time o' day.*<sup>58</sup>

The song – only part of which was recorded – was developed or improvised on the spot, revealing the leader's creativity in relating a social commentary that was not only humorous but also flattering. While singing, the men became more energetic in their rowing, with greater precision among them. The slaves incorporated music into their work as it helped to make their tasks more bearable and lifted their spirits. Some observers of these scenes misunderstood the functions of the songs and concluded that the slaves were happy, as they equated singing with enjoyment. Interestingly, in the case of the boat men referred to above, the singing started with a singular prelude from

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<sup>58</sup> Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 240-242.



one of the rowers which was between ‘a grunt and a groan’ and was probably a sign that the men were becoming tired and needed motivation.<sup>59</sup>

The slaves’ dancing was also misunderstood by the white community and efforts were made to prevent such activities. From the very early stages in the development of the slave society, drums in particular were banned because slaves’ masters recognised the ‘political function of the slaves’ music.’ In 1808 Methodist missionaries in the Virgin Islands complained about a form of African dancing call the *Camfou* which they described as filthy and lascivious. Edward Brathwaite, however was of the opinion that ‘available descriptions of slaves’ music and dancing are picturesque only, though now and then a hint comes through of grace of form and of discipline.’ But there was also an infusion of European dance and music in the culture of the slaves as was described by a visitor to the Virgin Islands in the early 1800s. One night music and dancing could be heard coming from the great house on the Mount Healthy Estate. There was the sound of a hurdy-gurdy, a tambourine, feet stomping and voices singing. It was a familiar tune, a well-known country dance and quadrille. Isaac, the head domestic slave, was shaking a tambourine and Polly, a mulatto girl, was playing what turned out to be a comb with paper wrapped around it while Nelly, the other domestic, was ‘attempting elegance in a figure dance of her own accompanying the movements with her voice.’<sup>60</sup>

Across the region, slaves were found to have adapted a very polite and courteous approach to dealing with each other. In a system which dehumanised individuals through the use of violence and other degrading forms of punishment, it is surprising that the attitude of the enslaved was not negatively affected. Based on West African

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<sup>59</sup> Morgan, “Slavery in the British Caribbean”, 389-398; Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society*, 120-132; Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 240-242.

<sup>60</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence, Charles Hodgson 8 Jan. 1808; Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society*, 22; Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 185-186.

forms of etiquette they developed a polite and respectful approach to dealing with each other, using titles such as Uncle, Aunty, Granny, Tatta (used for elderly male figures), Tonton (used for elderly female figures) etc. Visitors to the Virgin Islands also commented on the fact they were always greeted with familiarity and respect by all the slaves that they come into contact with, even little children whose chorus was always, 'How d'ye Massa?'. When one traveller arrived in Tortola he met a group of female slaves washing clothes in a shallow stream. One of the women greeted him in the following manner: 'How d'ye Massa? how you do sar? you come fra Englan'?' I wash you clothes, Massa, I do 'em well? <sup>61</sup>

### **Summary**

This Chapter gave a unique opportunity to reconstruct the Virgin Islands slave society in the early eighteen hundreds, focusing on the process of transition that was evident during the final decades of slavery in the British Caribbean. The demographic structure of the slave population in the colony, to a large extent, reflected the population trends in other areas of the British Caribbean. The female population was slightly higher than male and there was a shift in the population from the non-sugar area of the Cays to Tortola. This internal shift in the population resulted in Tortola having a higher percentage of older slaves than the Cays and the Cays having a younger population, including a higher percentage of children than on Tortola. It was found that the conditions of the enslaved in the non-sugar producing sector of the Cays was better than that of the enslaved in the sugar producing island of Tortola. However, there was a general settled state that was evident among the enslaved as they adapted socially to their environment. The following chapter will examine the extent to which the

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<sup>61</sup>Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society*, 239; Anon., *Letters from the Virgin Islands*, 141-142.

continued dislocation of slaves hampered or facilitated the process of transition within the Virgin Islands slave society.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Dislocation**

This chapter examines the levels and rate of dislocation during the final decades of slavery in the Virgin Islands. First an analysis of the colony's economy will be conducted to determine if the continued dislocation was as a result of declining economic conditions. The range and levels of dislocation experienced by the enslaved in the colony will be looked at in detail with regards to local and regional slave transfers. The impact of these transfers on the enslaved will be examined against the backdrop of their settled condition which, interestingly, was a result of the decline in the economic condition of the colony. Additionally, the response of the enslaved to those attempts to restructure their lives will also be looked at.

The relative calm and stability of the Virgin Islands' slave society was challenged in the 1820s when large numbers of the enslaved population were displaced as the slave owners attempted to restructure their operations in response to declining economic circumstances. Like their counterparts in the Leeward Islands, the planters in the Virgin Islands were faced with the reality that their continuous focus on the growth of sugar cane had exhausted the soil and they were desirous to move to the more fertile regions of the new sugar colonies. The unproductivity of the soil, however, resulted in greater personal benefits to the enslaved in the Virgin Islands and contributed greatly to their improved material condition. More land and time became available to the enslaved, allowing them to continue subsisting themselves. This arrangement also enabled the enslaved to become more self-sufficient as they continued to expand on their provision grounds and pastures, selling surplus produce in the market. Thus, the purported view of the planters that their desire to relocate to the new colonies (Trinidad and Guyana) was

in the interest of the enslaved and that the slaves had consented to the move was not always true; there was also opposition and resistance to the transfers.<sup>1</sup>

In 1823, at the height of the inter-regional trade the scenes of separation in the Virgin Islands were described as painful, with groups of slaves being forced to leave the colony. One man belonging to the Todman Estate on Tortola was so overwhelmed with emotions when his wife and children were wrenched from his arms and shipped out of the colony that he fell unconscious on the beach and medical aid had to be sought on his behalf. A high level of anxiety existed among the enslaved population as there were rumours about the sale and transfer of the occupants on several of the major estates in the colony. Tension was so high that one resident in the colony observed that a bloody revolt was only averted because the Methodist missionaries preached subjection and obedience to the slaves who were being transferred. Additionally, the missionaries prayed with and supported the individuals, right up to the time of their departure. Being Methodist they yielded to the wishes of their pastors and thanked them for their support.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to terminating the Atlantic slave trade to the British Caribbean, the 1807 Slave Trade Abolition Act also brought to the fore the levels and range of economic inequalities existing between and among the colonies in the region. After the closure of the slave trade, while some economies (mainly the old sugar colonies) found themselves in state of decline, the newer sugar colonies (Trinidad and Guyana) with a large expanse of untouched fertile land, were expanding their operations in sugar production. To facilitate this expansion, there was a desperate need for labour which was in abundance

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<sup>1</sup> *A Picture of Negro Slavery Drawn by the Colonists Themselves* (London: 1825), 122-128; *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, Vol. 1, 1825-1827 (1825), 384-392; Hilary McD. Beckles, "'An unfeeling Traffic' The Inter-colonial Movement of Slaves in the British Caribbean, 1807-1833" in *The Chattel Principle: Internal slave trade in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press 2004), 256-274.

<sup>2</sup> *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, 289; PP1825 (115) II Slave Trade, No. 3 Major Moody's Report (1825), 115, 152.

in the older sugar colonies. Thus, the Abolition Act also facilitated or motivated the transfer of slaves from the smaller colonies to the new and developing frontier sugar colonies in the British Caribbean. As, traditionally, slaves were always traded between colonies it was necessary to ensure that any inter-regional trade was not used as a cover for continuing the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the movement of slaves within the region was subjected to regulations which included the issuing of licences by the exporting colony and a system of quotas that limited the number of slaves that the respective colonies could import. Clearly, the growing demand for slave labour in the newer colonies could only be met legally through the inter-regional transfer of slaves and this movement was basically from the smaller colonies. In some instances, the relocation of slaves represented a transfer of the slave holders' operations to more profitable regions but there was also evidence that some speculations took place as the price on slaves in the newer colonies was at times doubled the amount offered in the old sugar colonies. In fact Barry Higman discovered that based on the 1834 slave compensation figures, the maximum amount paid for field workers in the old sugar colonies was £30 which was less than half of the average amount paid for similar workers in British Guyana.<sup>4</sup>

Higman's analysis of the economic health of the colonies with respect to productivity based on sugar output for the period 1815 to 1834, indicates that colonies with the weakest economy were more likely to be the greatest contributors to the inter-colonial slave trader. With regards to the Virgin Islands, Higman observed that the colony's

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<sup>3</sup>David Eltis, "The Traffic in Slaves between the British West Indian Colonies, 1807-1833", *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 25, No.1, (1972), 55-64; Seymour Drescher, "The fragmentation of the Atlantic Slavery and the British Inter-colonial Slave Trade", in *The Chattel Principle*, ed. Johnson, 234-255.

<sup>4</sup>Eric Williams, "The British West Indian Slave Trade After its Abolition in 1807", *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 27, no. 2, (1942), 175-191; Barry Higman, *The Slave Population of the British Caribbean 1807-1834*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1984), 50-51,79.

sugar output continuously declined during the period 1815 to 1834 and that the average compensation paid to planters for slaves in 1834 was the lowest in the Leeward Islands and the second lowest in the British Caribbean. To begin to get a wider picture of the performance of the Virgin Islands' economy in the final decades before emancipation, a series of statistical Tables compiled by Dr. John Stabo and submitted to the Colonial Office in 1825 are utilized.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2.1** Tortola's Economic Output

Product	1815	1823
<b>Sugar</b> ( <i>Cwt.</i> )	25,000	22,000
<b>Rum</b> ( <i>Gals</i> )	112,000	98,560
<b>Cotton</b> ( <i>Lbs.</i> )	15,000	13,500
<b>Salt</b> ( <i>Bush</i> )	0	0
<b>Horses</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	156	14
<b>Mules &amp; asses</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	631	526
<b>Cattle</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	750	1,720
<b>Sheep</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	4,325	6,230
<b>Goats</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	860	2,200
<b>Pigs</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	165	1,340
<b>Poultry</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	33,710	32,550
<b>Fish</b> ( <i>Lbs.</i> )	367,008	338,728
<b>Provisions</b> ( <i>Acres</i> )	1,100	1,170
<b>Annual Produce</b> (£)	155,911	80,087
<b>Export</b> (£)	111,500	44,449

Source: C.O. 239/9 Stabo Statistical Tables

**Table 2.2** The Cays' Economic Output

Product	1815	1823
<b>Sugar</b> ( <i>Cwt.</i> )	0	0
<b>Rum</b> ( <i>Gals</i> )	0	0
<b>Cotton</b> ( <i>Lbs</i> )	144,500	146,750
<b>Salt</b> ( <i>Bush</i> )	7,630	6,820
<b>Horses</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	74	66
<b>Mules &amp; asses</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	6	3
<b>Cattle</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	792	827
<b>Sheep</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	2,819	4,812
<b>Goats</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	665	1,025
<b>Pigs</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	435	485
<b>Poultry</b> ( <i>No.</i> )	9,825	11,500
<b>Fish</b> ( <i>Lbs.</i> )	1,053,240	1,245,009
<b>Provisions</b> ( <i>Acres</i> )	740	830
<b>Annual Produce</b> (£)	40,278	32,899
<b>Export</b> (£)	20,002	12,806

Source: C.O. 239/9 Stabo Statistical Tables

Stabo resided in the Virgin Islands from 1815 onwards and was married to the daughter of a local merchant. In addition to his medical practice, Stabo was also the attorney for the Josiah's Bay Plantation which was owned by Isaac Pickering, and served as a member of the local Privy Council. The records, however, are silent as to the reason why the Tables were compiled and submitted in the first place but they were used

<sup>5</sup> Higman, *Slave Populations*, 79; Colonial Office Correspondence (C.O.) 239/9 Stabo to Willmot, 26 Oct. 1823, enclosed Statistical Tables.

extensively in a report compiled by Major Moody in 1824 looking at the conditions of the Liberated Africans in the Virgin Islands and whether the colony economy could sustain them.<sup>6</sup>

In the previous chapter it was noted that in 1815, 23 per cent of the land (3,125 acres) on the island of Tortola was occupied by sugar estates which, based on Stabo's calculations, produced about 25,000 casks of sugar and 112,000 gallons of rum. By 1823, the amount of land cultivated in sugar cane was reduced by 23 per cent with a 12 per cent reduction in output both of sugar and rum. Overall, the island's net export which stood at £111,500 in 1815 had fallen by 23 per cent in 1823. Similar reductions were also seen in non-sugar related areas with respect to land cultivated and the output of crops. For example, in 1815, 95 acres of land on Tortola were cultivated in cotton and produced 15,000 pounds of cotton. But by 1823, 86 acres of land were used to produce 13,500 pounds of Cotton. As Table 2.1 shows, the only area where there was increased production on the island of Tortola was in livestock production (cattle, sheep, goats and pigs). Overall, there was a reduction of about 60 per cent in value of export from Tortola in 1823 compared to exports in 1815 (Table 2.1).

On the Cays, the colony's non-sugar sector, the economic situation was slightly better than on Tortola. Overall, there was an increase in most areas of production with the exception of salt, horses and mules and asses. While there was a decrease in the land allocated for cotton production on Tortola in the period 1815-1823 and a reduction in output, on the Cays cotton cultivation increased resulting in greater output. The improved performance of the economic sector on the Cays with regards to production, however, did not result in an increase in the value of exported products as there was a

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<sup>6</sup> British Parliamentary Papers (PP)1826 (81) Papers Relation to Captured Negroes, Part II of Major Moody's Report (1826), 110-123; C.O. 239/13 Memorandum from Horton: The Case of Dr Stabo, 13 July 1826; Higman, *Slave Populations*, 79.



reduction of about 36 per cent in 1823 over the export figure for 1815. This shortfall was due to the decrease in commodity prices which in some cases contracted 50 per cent over the period 1815 to 1823 (Table 2.2).<sup>7</sup>

Two areas where expansion occurred in both economic sectors, on Tortola and on the Cays, were in the planting of provisions and the rearing of animals. These areas also reflect the personal ventures of the enslaved, who as a result of the depressed state of the economy, were given more land and time to enable them to feed themselves. While the planters considered that the soil was exhausted with respect to the production of sugar, it adequately supported livestock and yielded provisions to the benefit of the enslaved. This level of accommodation on the part of the enslaved will be looked at in greater detail in Chapter 4 where issues related to autonomy are discussed. At this juncture, however, it should be noted that the catalogue of failure with respect to the economy in the Virgin Islands, as recorded by Stabo, shows a continuous reduction in the value of all types of property except that which was owned by the enslaved. In 1815, it was reported that property owned by the enslaved in the Virgin Islands was valued at £29,000 and in 1823 that figure had increased to £30,064 (Tables 2.1 and 2.2).<sup>8</sup>

Higman has also shown that in 1815-19 the rate of sugar production in the Virgin Islands was .36 tonnes per slave. In 1820-24 the production rate fell by more than half to .16 tonnes per slave. While there was a slight increase in 1825-29 to .17 tonnes, in 1830-34 the rate of production returned to .16 tonnes per slave. Comparatively, in Antigua, while the rate of production in 1815-19 was lower than in the Virgin Islands at .29 tonnes per slave, there was only a slight reduction to .26 tonnes in 1820-21 and 1821-29, and an increase to a high of .30 tonnes per slave in 1830-34.

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<sup>7</sup> C.O. 239/9 Stabo to Willmot, 26 Oct. 1823, enclosed Statistical Tables.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Unlike in some colonies where the economic decline resulted in a subsistence crisis among the enslaved and prompted them to accept relocation as a means to improve their material condition, an opposite outcome was observed in the Virgin Islands. As the economic fortunes of the planters declined, the material conditions of the enslaved improved giving them a greater stake in the society. Seemingly, as long as the enslaved did not constitute a financial burden on their masters, who were strapped for cash, they were left to their own devices. In this regard, Pheobe Ellis, a 32 year old woman on the Josiah's Bay Estate and her two coloured sons, Alexander age 11 and Alphonso age 8, were allowed to live as free without any interference from their master. Moreover, based on their already settled existence, the enslaved in the Virgin Islands 'resisted attempts to restructure and disrupt their social lives through relocation'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Internal transfer of Slaves**

In 1798 when the General Legislative Council and Assembly of the Leeward Islands met to address issues of amelioration as directed by the British Parliament, there were two matters that were left outstanding. After that historic meeting, the President of the Council informed the Duke of Portland, the Secretary of State, that as was suggested he had introduced measures to: i) Make provision for the appointment of a protector of slaves in the respective colonies, and ii) attach plantation slaves to their respective estates. The President lamented that the information had reached him too late to ensure sufficient time for them to be dealt with and as a result the measures had died at the committee stage. He was, however, quick to point out that the second measure which would have prevented slave owners from selling slaves to pay off their debts, among

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<sup>9</sup> PP 1828(010) The Slave Population in his Majesty's Possessions in the West Indies, 1827,92,101

other things, was accepted in principle and would be dealt with at the next sitting of council scheduled to be convened in a few months.<sup>10</sup>

The meeting the President referred to was to be held in Antigua on 1 November 1798, but never took place because, apart from the President, none of the other members of the Council or the General Assembly attended. It would seem that the Leeward Islands' Legislators, having achieved their initial goal of staving off interference from the British Parliament in their local legislative matters, did not see the need for further concessions to be given with regards to the treatment of slaves. Thus, in spite of good intentions, the slaves in the Leeward Islands, as in other parts of the British Caribbean, were not tied to the soil on which they lived, and could be moved arbitrarily and used as a means through which their owners settled their debts. In some cases, in addition to being placed on auction, slaves were at times held in prison on account of their master's non-payment of taxes or other bills.<sup>11</sup>

The period after 1807 saw the decline in the fortunes of many planters which inevitably led to their operations being taken over by merchant creditors and or holders of mortgages. When this type of change in ownership occurred, sometimes little change happened in the life of slaves as they remained on the same estates, at times with the same people responsible for their management as before. If any changes occurred, it would, of necessity, have been with regards to the overall operations as the new owners endeavoured to make the facilities economically viable. On the other hand, individual or groups of slaves were also sold or exchanged, requiring that they relocate to be with their new owners. Thus, it became commonplace that a slave had several owners in his

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<sup>10</sup> PP1803-04 (119) Thompson to Duke of Portland.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

or her lifetime. These transfers of ownership of slaves were legal transactions in which the slaves had no choice, but suffered the disruption that resulted.<sup>12</sup>

In addressing this matter, Higman found that while information compiled by the Commissioners for Compensation revealed that the rate of transfer across the British Caribbean was on average 1.3 per cent, more specific figures from the slave registration returns revised that number upwards to 3 per cent. The colony found to have the highest rates of transfer was the Virgin Islands with 8.4 per cent, while the colony with lowest (1.8 per cent) was St Lucia. The suggestion Higman put forward was that the rate and level of the transfer of slaves was tied directly to the economic health of the colony, meaning that as the economic prospects of the colony faded, more slave owners were forced, for whatever reason, to sell or otherwise dispose of some or all of their slaves.<sup>13</sup>

While Higman estimated that the ownership transfer rate in the Virgin Islands for the period 1828-1831 was 8.4 per cent, Table 2.3 shows that for the same period the transfer rate for the colony was over 12 per cent. The revised figures, which were compiled from data extracted from the slave registers, took into consideration multiple transfers for individual slaves throughout the period. As slaves were followed through each register, anomalies and omissions were easily flagged while matching the registration forms of individuals who were sold or transferred slaves with those who were acquiring. Throughout the period 1818-1831, a relatively large percentage of the slave population in the Virgin Islands was recorded as having changed ownership. The highest rate recorded, 21.27, was on the Cays between 1818-1822 while the lowest, 9.35, was on Tortola in the period 1828-1831. While the average rate of transfer of slaves in the Virgin Islands was 14.16 on Tortola, the rate of transfer was two per cent

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<sup>12</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 79 - 84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

below the colony's average as opposed to that of the Cays where the rate was three per cent above the national rate. The gender group with the highest rate of transfer was females on the Cays, where on an average 19.55 per cent of the group was subjected to transfers. Here again, if we follow Higman's premise, it was the Cays as the non-sugar sector that was hardest hit economically in the colony (Table 2.3).

**Table 2.3** Percentages of Slaves Transferred between 1818 and 1831.

	1818-1822			1825-1828		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Virgin Is.	13.2	13.6	13.4	20.4	19.6	20.0
Tortola	10.6	11.5	11.1	20.4	19.5	19.9
The Cays	21.1	21.4	21.3	20.4	20.3	20.4
	1822-1825			1828-1831		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Virgin Is.	10.2	11.6	11.0	14.6	10.3	12.3
Tortola	11.0	10.2	10.5	11.7	7.4	9.4
The Cays	7.8	16.8	12.4	22.9	19.6	21.2

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

While no set patterns could be discerned from the figures presented, one thing remains evident: the ownership transfer rate of slaves within the Virgin Islands was far higher than the rate of transfer within the entire British Caribbean as calculated by Higman. Notwithstanding the economic conditions of the region, these transfers in most cases caused major disruption in the lives of the enslaved, as invariably they resulted in relocation. In particular, this was the case with regards to ownership changes that were the direct result of purchases of slaves who, in some instances, were sold by the courts as a result of debts incurred by the slaveholders. In the period 1818 to 1831, 70 per cent of the 2,711 slaves that exchanged hands were a direct result of sales, which meant that those individuals were subjected to relocation and disruption to their lives. In some

instances, while the family connections within specific groups of slaves were not severed as they were sold together, there were also instances where individual slaves were completely separated from their friends and family. For example, Mary Ann, a 9 year old girl belonging to A. C. Hill, was sold three different times during the period 1818-1822. In 1828 when Mary Ann was 15, her owner Elizabeth Dix sold her to Francis Dubois who after a few years later, in 1831 sold her to Anthony Millard. Like Mary Ann, a total of about 534 slaves were subjected to multiple sales during the period 1818-1831. Overall, while both male and female slaves of all ages were equally subjected to being sold, young females seemed more likely to be sold two or more times during the period under review.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 2.4** Percentages of Slaves sold in the Virgin Islands, 1818-1831.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	7.1	6.9	<b>7.0</b>
<b>5-9</b>	10.7	11.6	<b>11.1</b>
<b>10-14</b>	10.9	10.3	<b>10.6</b>
<b>15-19</b>	10.8	10.9	<b>10.9</b>
<b>20-24</b>	13.1	9.6	<b>11.4</b>
<b>25-29</b>	9.9	10.3	<b>10.1</b>
<b>30-34</b>	10.3	6.5	<b>8.4</b>
<b>35-39</b>	6.0	7.9	<b>7.0</b>
<b>40-44</b>	7.3	8.7	<b>8.0</b>
<b>45-49</b>	4.7	5.8	<b>5.2</b>
<b>50-54</b>	3.5	4.5	<b>4.0</b>
<b>55-59</b>	1.6	2.8	<b>2.2</b>
<b>60-64</b>	2.6	1.8	<b>2.2</b>
<b>65-69</b>	1.0	1.2	<b>1.1</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.5	1.0	<b>0.7</b>
<b>75+</b>	0.1	0.3	<b>0.2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

<sup>14</sup> T71/370 – 374 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1818-1834.

Table 2.4 shows that 55.67 per cent of the slaves who were sold in the period 1818-1831 were in the prime age group (age 15-44); the group that was most likely to attract the highest possible price. But because these individuals were in the most fertile period of their life, they were most likely would have had families. By comparison we see that just over 28 per cent of individuals sold were less than 15 years of age. Further, reflecting the idea that family groups were at times sold together, just over 15 per cent of the sales involved individuals who were over 45 years of age. Another point that is worth observing is that the percentage of males in the main working group, ages 15-44 was slightly higher than the percentage of females in similar groups. This might be indicating a preference for the sale and purchase of young males as they might have attracted higher prices than females. For example, in the case of two slaves, Betsey and Damon, both aged 32, who were purchased from the estate of John Hanley by the Dennistoun Company on 25 October 1823; £53 was paid for Damon while £40 was paid for Betsey. While this difference in price could have been based on skills and strength, there is no information in the records to allow us to make a distinction.<sup>15</sup>

Within the Virgin Islands, about 75 per cent of the sales of slaves during the period 1818-1831 were of slaves on the island of Tortola and the remaining 25 per cent on the Cays. Considering that the enslaved population on the Cays comprised about 20 per cent of the overall enslaved population in the colony, this shows a slightly higher rate of sale for slaves on the Cays. But such an observation does not in any way under estimate the negative impact those sales had on the lives of the enslaved population. Like their counterparts who were subjected to removal from the Virgin Islands to other colonies in the British Caribbean, the enslaved on the Cays often found themselves being removed from their island homes and relocated to other islands within the Virgin Islands. This

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

was the situation that faced 60 slaves on the island of Anegada who were sold by their owner Donald Cameron in the period 1818-1822. At the time, the enslaved population of Anegada was 114. Consequently, such a sale meant that the population was reduced by more than half, which would no doubt have negatively impacted the remaining slaves. The same situation would have applied to the 176 slaves that George Martin purchased in Virgin Gorda after the death of their owner John Rhymer and relocated to a sugar estate on Tortola.<sup>16</sup>

### **Ruth Lettsome Estates**

In 1809 when Ruth Lettsome died, she was described as the largest slave owner in the Virgin Islands, with an estate of over 1,000 slaves and an income of £20,000 per annum. She had inherited the slaves and several estates in 1804 from her grandfather Bezaliel Hodge and upon her death her estate which was held in a trust, reverted to her heirs. In 1818 the estates were being managed by William Payne Georges Jr. (Ruth Lettsome's son and heir) and had a total of 708 slaves on a combined acreage of 1,023 acres. The number of slaves on each estate ranged from 99, on the Great Mountain Estate to 141 on the Mount Healthy Estate. As all the estates were located in different sections of the island of Tortola, they functioned independently in the production of sugar. In 1822, the Dennistoun Company which held a mortgage on the property, took over the management of the estates. Clearly the Lettsome estates represented a major investment on the part of the mortgage holder and efforts were made to ensure that they were in a position to manage the assets to their advantage with commitment to pay remittances to the heirs (Table 2.5).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Vernon W. Pickering, *Early History of the British Virgin Islands From Columbus to Emancipation* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.(Falcon Publications International, 2000), 162-164; CO 239/23 McQueen to Murry, 14 Feb 1830; T71/371 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1822



**Table 2.5** Ruth Lettsome Estates by Acreage and Number of Slaves, 1818.

Name of Estate	Number of Slaves	Proportion Males	Proportion Creoles	Mean Age	Size by Acreage	Slaves per Acre
Cane Garden Bay	110	0.4	0.9	28.4	249	2.3
Great Mountain	99	0.4	0.9	26.5	150	1.9
Lower Estate	105	0.5	0.8	32.3	200	1.9
Mount Healthy	141	0.5	0.9	23.8	210	1.5
Turnbull Mountain	118	0.4	0.9	27.6	200	1.7
North Side Estate	135	0.4	0.9	28	314	2.3

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

**Table 2.6** Percentages of slaves on the Lettsome Estates, 1825.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	10.7	10.8	<b>10.7</b>
<b>5-9</b>	7.0	6.0	<b>6.4</b>
<b>10-14</b>	8.1	7.4	<b>7.7</b>
<b>15-19</b>	15.1	11.3	<b>12.9</b>
<b>20-24</b>	11.1	7.4	<b>8.9</b>
<b>25-29</b>	10.3	7.1	<b>8.4</b>
<b>30-34</b>	7.0	8.4	<b>7.8</b>
<b>35-39</b>	7.0	12.1	<b>10.0</b>
<b>40-44</b>	4.8	5.5	<b>5.2</b>
<b>45-49</b>	5.5	7.1	<b>6.4</b>
<b>50-54</b>	5.2	2.6	<b>3.7</b>
<b>55-59</b>	4.8	5.5	<b>5.2</b>
<b>60-64</b>	1.5	2.4	<b>2.0</b>
<b>65-69</b>	1.1	3.2	<b>2.3</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.7	1.1	<b>0.6</b>
<b>75+</b>	0.4	2.4	<b>1.7</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: The Virgin Slave Database

In 1822, there were 751 slaves on the Lettsome Estates, 58 per cent of whom were females. Table 2.6 above, shows that the prime workers on the estate amounted to just over half of the overall population; but in spite of the fact that there were slightly more females than males on the properties, the percentage of males in the prime working group was just over 55 per cent whereas the percentage of females in the similar

category was 51.7 of the females on the properties. On the other hand, while children under the age of 15 years comprised 24.8 per cent of the population, older slaves over the age of 45 made up close to 22 per cent of the enslaved population on the estates. The Lettsome Estates were among the most valuable in the colony and represented a major investment on the part of the mortgagee. After taking control of the estates, the mortgage holder sold the mortgage portfolio to another company (MacQueen and Company) for what was described as “a valuable consideration.”<sup>18</sup>

It was the take over and transfer of these estates that led to a series of events that shows further how the social stability of the slaves in the Virgin Islands was impacted as the planters and their creditors tried to maintain their economic viability. In February 1830, after several years of not receiving any remittances from the estates, William Payne Georges travelled from England to Tortola and personally took possession of the estates. Only one year before, Georges had engaged in a similar activity in an attempt to force MacQueen and Company to meet their obligation to pay remittances to the heirs. At that time, in an attempt to resolve the matter, the local partner in the company who lived in the Virgin Islands, negotiated an annual sum to be paid. Shortly after the agreement was made, the individual died and the company’s owners in England failed to honour the agreement.<sup>19</sup>

When Georges arrived on Tortola, he sent urgent messages to the individual estates instructing the slaves not to allow the removal of any stock or produce from the estates. The slaves followed Georges’ instructions and in essence thwarted the attempts of the estates’ managers, who were informed of Georges’ arrival on the islands, to remove and secure produce. Later that evening, Georges, with the support of his legal advisor

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<sup>18</sup> CO239/23 Correspondence from John Irving, 23 February 1830.

<sup>19</sup> CO239/23 Georges to Murry, 6 May 1830.

entered and laid claim to the Cane Garden Bay Estate where he was met with some resistance from the manager of the estate. That resistance led Georges to call on the slaves who joined with him in a show of force thereby allowing them to gain access to the buildings. This scene was repeated at Mount Healthy and the other estates. Before Georges took control of the estates, the managers were only able to secure for the company a small portion of the sugar and rum that was already made.<sup>20</sup>

Word was sent out that slaves on the estates were in open rebellion and the Governor was called upon to provide a military response. When the Governor subsequently visited the Virgin Islands, he found that there was no need for alarm as the slaves were about their work as usual. With much pressure from the mortgage holder in England, the Governor was forced to issue an order requiring that Georges give up the estates. The mortgage holder filed charges against Georges in the court in the Virgin Islands to force him to pay for the damages and the loss they sustained as a result of his actions. This proved to be a very frustrating exercise which ended in failure. On the first day, when the case was to be heard there was a scheduled meeting for the island's House of Assembly and Privy Council, so the court was adjourned. On the next scheduled date there were not enough jurors to proceed with the matter and finally on the last occasion only three out of five judges appeared and they on their own had no power to try the case or adjourn the court; it was thrown out.<sup>21</sup>

MacQueen made a formal request to transfer the slaves on the Lettsome estates from the Virgin Islands to Trinidad where he could be assured that the company's investment would be protected by some "constitutional authority." In so doing he declared his lack of confidence in the judicial system of the Virgin Islands and the visible absence of any

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<sup>20</sup> CO239/23 Rogers to MacQueen, 27 Feb. 1830.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Dookhan, *History of the British Virgin Islands* (Caribbean University Press in Association with Bowker Pub. Co., 1975), 85 -86; CO239/23 Woodcock to MacQueen, 9 June 1830.

form of protection for his investment that was afforded by the local or regional government. In the view of MacQueen, one of the principal owners of the company, the Virgin Islands had plunged into a “dreadful state of disorganisation.” As for their experiences with Georges and the willingness of the slaves to assist him, the company decided to adopt some stringent measures which included postponing the issuing of the annual allowance of clothes for the slaves. This measure, in particular, was designed to discourage slaves from assisting Georges if he was to ever return to the estates.<sup>22</sup>

Officials in the Colonial Office were against the idea of moving the slaves from Tortola, so no permission was granted and they also expressed their disapproval of the stringent measures which were likely to create discontent among the enslaved. In fact such a measure, it was pointed out, would have been in violation of the laws governing the management of slaves in the Leeward Islands. Officially, it was felt that notwithstanding the short-comings of the political and judicial systems in the colony, the slaves should not be made to suffer as they had no control over any of the systems cited.<sup>23</sup>

### **Inter-regional Slave Transfers**

While all types of transfers were disruptive to the lives of the enslaved, inter-regional transfers had the most devastating effect on both the enslaved and the slave society as a whole. David Eltis, in analysing the inter-regional movement of slaves in the British Caribbean after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, observed that within a period of 23 years, over 22,000 slaves were transported between various colonies. The busiest year of the trade was identified as 1816, when it was found that colonies such as the Bahamas and Dominica exported over five per cent of their total slave population. As

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. See also note affixed to the correspondence.

was observed earlier, the flow of slaves was from the older colonies to the new sugar colonies of Trinidad and Guyana, but the numbers involved were not considered significant to alter the demographic structure of either the exporting or receiving colony. This fact, however, did not in any way limit the level of social disruption and emotional difficulties that were inflicted on the enslaved, who were forcibly removed from their homes and forced to undergo the experiences that their forefathers had endured during previous centuries.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 2.7** Percentage of Slaves exported from Tortola, 1822-1825.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	6.3	4.6	<b>5.4</b>
<b>5-9</b>	11.7	9.7	<b>10.6</b>
<b>10-14</b>	12.5	9.7	<b>11.0</b>
<b>15-19</b>	9.8	10.1	<b>10.0</b>
<b>20-24</b>	10.1	10.1	<b>10.1</b>
<b>25-29</b>	10.9	11.1	<b>11.0</b>
<b>30-34</b>	9.0	9.2	<b>9.1</b>
<b>35-39</b>	8.5	9.2	<b>8.9</b>
<b>40-44</b>	3.5	4.8	<b>4.2</b>
<b>45-49</b>	4.4	4.2	<b>4.2</b>
<b>50-54</b>	2.5	5.1	<b>3.9</b>
<b>55-59</b>	4.6	4.4	<b>4.5</b>
<b>60-64</b>	3.5	2.1	<b>2.8</b>
<b>65-69</b>	1.6	2.5	<b>2.1</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.8	1.2	<b>1.0</b>
<b>75+</b>	0.3	2.1	<b>1.3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave database

**Table 2.8** Percentage of Slaves exported from the Cays, 1822-1825.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	13.5	13.4	<b>13.4</b>
<b>5-9</b>	13.5	9.9	<b>11.5</b>
<b>10-14</b>	8.5	14.0	<b>11.5</b>
<b>15-19</b>	13.5	10.5	<b>11.8</b>
<b>20-24</b>	11.4	9.9	<b>10.5</b>
<b>25-29</b>	7.8	8.1	<b>8.0</b>
<b>30-34</b>	7.1	5.2	<b>6.1</b>
<b>35-39</b>	9.9	7.0	<b>8.3</b>
<b>40-44</b>	6.4	9.9	<b>8.3</b>
<b>45-49</b>	3.6	4.1	<b>3.8</b>
<b>50-54</b>	2.1	4.1	<b>3.2</b>
<b>55-59</b>	0.7	2.3	<b>1.6</b>
<b>60-64</b>	2.1	0.6	<b>1.3</b>
<b>65+</b>	0.0	1.2	<b>0.6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

The export of slaves from the Virgin Islands reached its peak in 1824 just before the inter-colonial slave trade was brought to an end. The slave registers for the Virgin Islands recorded a total of 1,114 slaves being exported in the period 1822-1825. This

<sup>24</sup> Eltis, "The Traffic in Slaves", 57-59; Beckles, "Intercolonial Movement of Slaves", 267

figure represented close to 20 per cent (which was relatively high) of the colony's total slave population. When it was disaggregated by economic blocks within the Virgin Islands, 801 slaves or 72 per cent of those exported were from Tortola while the remainder, 313 (28%) were from the Cays.<sup>25</sup> On Tortola as well as on the Cays, over 50 per cent of the slaves who were exported were females. Over 30 per cent of the females exported from Tortola were in their child-bearing years and a slightly lower percentage of 27.8 per cent of the females from the Cays fell in the same category (Table 2.7 & 2.8).

With regards to the main work gangs, those slaves in the 15-44 age group made up about 53 per cent of the total exports from the colony. The main difference observed between the two groups, exported from Tortola and the Cays, is that on the one hand there was a higher percentage of children among the slaves from the Cays than from Tortola and on the other hand, the percentage of older slaves exported from Tortola was higher than those exported from the Cays (Tables 2.7 and 2.8).

In the majority of cases, the slaves exported from the Virgin Islands constituted whole estates, especially from Tortola. As a result, the structure of the exported population resembled closely the overall slave population in the colony. In situations where the slaves were purchased from various sources with the express purpose of exporting them, there is no evidence to indicate that the process showed preference for a particular gender. Across the British Caribbean, it was discovered that unlike the Atlantic slave trade, the inter-regional transfer of slaves did not have a high ratio of male to female

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<sup>25</sup> Treasury Records (T) 71/371-372 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1822 & 1825

slaves even though the preference of planters in the new sugar colonies would traditionally have been for a large number of young male slaves.<sup>26</sup>

One particular planter, Joseph Harragin, who transported his slaves from the Virgin Islands to Trinidad on a purely speculative basis, intended to sell or lease them but eventually bought a sugar estate there. The initial group of slaves transported by Harragin came from the Cays and as a result would not have been familiar with or accustomed to heavy work on a sugar estate, as on the Cays the main crop planted was cotton. Harragin himself was also a cotton planter even though he served for a period (September 1821- April 1823) as Receiver of the Martin Estates on Tortola which was one of the leading sugar estates in the colony. At that time, Martin's heirs objected to Harragin's appointment noting that he had no experience in managing a sugar estate. After purchasing an estate in Trinidad, Harrigan returned to the Virgin Islands and purchased additional stocks of slaves that were being auctioned. In total he transported about one hundred and seventy slaves to Trinidad.<sup>27</sup>

### **Pickering Estate**

In May 1823, Isaac Pickering, an absentee planter, petitioned the British Government for permission to remove his slaves from the Virgin Islands to Trinidad. When Pickering initially requested permission to move his slaves to Trinidad, he lamented on his economic woes and stated that the hurricane of 1819 had caused considerable damage on his estates, leaving large portions of his land unfit for use. During the storm, many of the dwelling houses, plantation works and slave houses were allegedly

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<sup>26</sup> PP1826-27(479) Trinidad Negroes, Evidence taken by the Committee of the Council of Trinidad, Testimony of Joseph Harrigan 21 Dec. 1824, 6-7; T71/371-372 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1822 & 1825, 1825; Drescher, "The Fragmentation of Atlantic Slavery", 243.

<sup>27</sup> C.O. 239/11 Narrative of the Proceedings which have taken place in the island of Tortola respecting the Property bequeathed by the Late Hon. George Martin, of said island Esquire, to his coloured children, 1 August 1824; T71/372 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1825; PP1826-27(479) Trinidad Negroes, Evidence taken by the Committee of the Council of Trinidad, Testimony of Joseph Harrigan 21 Dec. 1824, 6-7.

destroyed. After the hurricane, he stated a severe drought had persisted limiting the recovery process and further deepening his economic difficulties. Pickering claimed that as a result of these situations he incurred considerable debt. The interest of this debt continued to increase annually, largely as a result of his average production of 100 hogsheads of sugar per annum which could not cover his financial commitments. Those commitments included supplies for the estates, maintenance of the slaves, and payment of his mortgage. On the latter, he sadly noted that he could but barely pay the interest.<sup>28</sup>

In an attempt to find avenues to redress his financial state, Pickering said that he sent his son, John Pickering, who was responsible for managing his estates on Tortola, to Trinidad to determine if it was viable to move his slaves there. While in Trinidad, the younger Pickering was also to search for an available estate for sale. To all indications such an estate was found and upon John Pickering's return to Tortola he gathered the slaves to inform them of the impending move to Trinidad. In a letter dated 11 September 1822, John Pickering informed his father that all the slaves had agreed to the move. He stated "each and all declared themselves ready to go and it is with some difficulty that they can now be kept quiet, their excitement is excessive."<sup>29</sup>

Considering that Pickering was speaking about slaves on two different estates - one comprising over 300 individuals - with varying ages and possible different types of family composition, some of which might have extended to adjoining estates, it is almost impossible that there were no dissenters. Pickering's correspondence to his father about a month later seems to bear out this suspicion as he again returns to the topic, this time saying that "no persuasion appears necessary to be practiced to incline

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<sup>28</sup> CO 239/9 Petition of Isaac Pickering Received 22 May 1823.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



the Negros to move.”<sup>30</sup> There is no doubt that both Pickerings, father and son, were aware of the preconditions that were set with regards to moving slaves from one colony to another and hence, is it that they were going all out to give the impression that these were being met. In his petition, Isaac Pickering declared that he “has always been a kind and indulgent master to his slaves and has upon all occasions considered their comfort and amelioration as a primary object, and has more particularly to their instructions, and would on no account have entertained the plan of removing them if he were not satisfied it was for their comfort, with their free will as well as for his advantage.”<sup>31</sup>

The unfurling of events in Tortola seems, however, to tell the true story, particularly on the Josiah’s Bay Estate, the larger of the two estates owned by Pickering. After the slaves were informed of the move to Trinidad, the manager of the estate recognised that they became restless and unruly. On Wednesday, 22 October, 1823 Charles Cother, the manager of the Josiah’s Bay Estate, discovered that a large quantity of sugar cane in the field had been destroyed. He immediately sent for the watchman, a slave named Santlo, who was assigned to the area. Santlo ignored the request, forcing the manager to go into the field to find him. When Cother found the gang working on the south side of the estate he asked Santlo why he did not come when he was called. Santlo’s excuse was that he did not know why he called him. The manager then ordered Santlo to ‘go before him’ but Santlo refused and went back to his work.<sup>32</sup>

Two slaves, Phoenix and George, who were working beside Santlo were instructed by Cother to hold Santlo and carry him out of the field. The two slaves protested and Cother ordered the driver to cart-whip them and remove them from the field. At that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> CO239/10 Porter to Maxwell, 15 June 1824, enclosure Minutes of Board of Magistrates 17 Nov. 1823, Testimony of Charles Cother.

point, almost all of the slaves in the gang left their work and surrounded the manager with their machetes in their hands in a threatening manner. Recognising the danger, Cother put his hand in his pocket as if he had a pistol and the gang backed off. Cother then berated the driver and asked him to order the men back to work which he did and the gang resumed their work. However, the situation again escalated when Johnny, the head watchman, who had brought the message into the field, showed up. An argument erupted between Johnny and the members of the gang as they accused him of carrying news to the manager about them. As Johnny tried to leave the field several of the men pursued him but he was rescued by the driver and the manager. The gang then went back to their work.<sup>33</sup>

On Friday 24 October, John Pickering, attorney to Isaac Pickering, visited the Josiah's Bay Estate. When the gang of slaves who were involved in the disturbance two days prior saw him, they ran away. Mitchel, the driver, reported sending messages asking the gang to come back but they refused. Considering that the slaves had the Thursday off from work to attend to their own personal affairs and freely returned to work on Friday, it is difficult to understand why Pickering's arrival on the estate prompted them to run away. This reaction on the part of the slaves seems to indicate that their grievances extended far beyond the manager and how he dealt with them and had more to do with Pickering's decision to relocate them to Trinidad against their wishes. Running away then, was a form of protest on the part of the slaves as they tried to resist the proposed move to Trinidad.<sup>34</sup>

Commenting on how the situation was handled, George Porter, President of the Virgin Islands, stated that "perhaps in this particular instance, it would have been politic in the

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<sup>33</sup> CO239/10 Porter to Maxwell 15 June 1824, enclosure Minutes of Board of Magistrates 17 Nov. 1823, Testimony of Michelle, the driver.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

manager to have overlooked the destruction, (great as it was) of the canes; but knowing this gang of Mr. Pickering's as I do, I am confident any attempt to correct or even prevent their misconduct (especially at that time, when they were hesitating whether they would or would not go to Trinidad) would have brought on insubordination, riotous, if not even actually rebellious conduct." It would seem that the manager needed to be more sensitive about what the slaves were going through emotionally and recognise the destruction of the cane as a protest. Information from an unknown publication submitted to the Colonial Office sometime after the incident suggested that it was the slaves' opposition to being relocated to Trinidad that sparked the unrest. The idea put forward was that while it was possible that some of the young men who craved the excitement of change would have readily accepted the challenge to move, the delay in the actual transfer gave them an opportunity to re-think their decision. Thus, recognising what the move really meant for them and the drastic change which would have been required, not to mention the friends and possible family they would have left behind, they changed their mind.<sup>35</sup>

On Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> October, John Pickering notified the Privy Council that he was informed by the Manager of the Josiah's Bay Estate that the gang of slaves quitted the estate early that morning armed with machetes, bayonets and sticks. Taking the matter seriously, the president of the colony sent out circulars calling for the creation of a hunting party to search for the slaves on Monday morning. What seems difficult to understand with this decision is that there did not seem to be a sense of urgency considering that the information stated that the slaves were armed and therefore presumed dangerous.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> CO239/10 Porter to Maxwell 15 July 1824; C.O.239/11 Newspaper Clipping from unknown source: Insurrection on Tortola.

<sup>36</sup> C.O.239/10 Extract of Minutes of the Meeting of Council 25 October 1823.

While the records do not indicate how or when the 21 slaves were captured, they were brought before a Board of Magistrates on Monday 17 November 1823. Several charges were laid against them and witnesses called. After hearing the evidence in the case, the magistrates found the slaves guilty and ordered the ring leaders (Bristol, Lankey and Sciah) to be publicly whipped and thereafter banished from the colony. All arrangements for the banishment of slaves from the colony were to be made by the owner of the estate.<sup>37</sup> About a month later the slaves were exported from the Virgin Islands aboard the vessel, *Princess of Wales*, bound for Trinidad.<sup>38</sup>

On the evening before the slaves were scheduled to leave Tortola, Pickering went to the jail, which was in the centre of Road Town and had the prisoners chained together by twos. They were marched through the Town and taken to the dock from where they were ferried to the ship which was waiting for them. On the ship the men were chained together and the vessel left the port before the scheduled time. The next morning when relatives and friends came to see the men off, they were dismayed to find that the ship had already left. This situation only further intensified the grief that was being experienced by the whole community.<sup>39</sup>

Pickering's decision to transport the imprisoned slaves to Trinidad sparked a controversy and gave the impression that the trial was just an attempt to enforce his will on the most reluctant of his slaves. In response to public criticism, Isaac Pickering, who was in the England, said that the decision to send the slaves to Trinidad was made by the court in the Virgin Islands.<sup>40</sup> This summation was not true, as based on the sentencing laid down by the Magistrates, the issue of transportation of the slaves was

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<sup>37</sup> CO239/10 Extract of the Minutes of the Sitting of the Boards of Magistrates, 18 November 1823.

<sup>38</sup> C.O.239/13 Enclosure No.2 An account of slaves exported from Tortola, Jan. 1821 to Dec. 1825.

<sup>39</sup> Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, Vol.1 (1825-27), 389.

<sup>40</sup> C.O. 239/10 Pickering to Colquhoun, 6 April 1824.

left entirely to Pickering's son, who was his attorney. To all indications this seemed to have been an extraordinary arrangement since the common practice in the Virgin Islands at that time was to have slaves who were banished transported to the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico.<sup>41</sup>

When asked to report on the removal of the convicted slaves, the President of the Virgin Islands, George Porter said that he had not received any written information on the subject nor was he aware of where to find any. This was a strange response considering that Porter was also one of the sitting magistrates on the Board that convicted and sentenced the slaves. Further, as the slaves were imprisoned, an order had to be signed by a magistrate directing the Marshal to deliver them for transportation and lastly, the vessel that was consigned to convey the felons out of the colony of necessity had to receive clearance from customs officials. Porter revealed, however, that his earlier fear of being called to force the slaves to leave, which he had expressed in private correspondence to the Governor, was based on the fact that the slaves had categorically declared that they would not go. If such a situation arose, the President wanted to have guidance on how to proceed since the matter was such a delicate one. He expressed relief that in the end the slaves left voluntarily, as he had heard nothing to the contrary. The records from the Virgin Islands are silent with respect to why Pickering's slaves eventually agreed to the transfer but an incident that occurred in Trinidad a few years later will shed more light. We will discuss this shortly.<sup>42</sup>

The exodus of slaves from the Virgin Islands had begun in earnest. On 6 January 1824, John Pickering exported another 50 slaves to Trinidad with several other trips following on 29 March, 8 May, 12 July, and 9 December 1824. In total, Pickering exported 504

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<sup>41</sup> PP1826-27 (36), Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies (1826), 91.

<sup>42</sup> C.O.239/10 Porter to Maxwell, 15 June 1824.

slaves from the Virgin Islands to Trinidad. This total was a bit higher than the actual number of slaves recorded as being owned by Pickering in 1822.<sup>43</sup>

The 1822 slave register, which was the last recorded return submitted for Pickering's estates, showed that there was a total of 481 slaves on the two estates. Females made up 56 per cent of the total number. The slaves in the most active work group, ages 15 - 44, accounted for almost over half of the total number of slaves on the two estates combined. While the number of women (128) in this category was slightly more than the number of men (103), the percentage of the overall number of men in the working group was about 49 per cent as opposed to the 47 per cent for the total number of women who were in their prime. While children under the age of 15 made up over 30 per cent of the total population, older slaves accounted for just about 20 per cent of the population (Table 2.9).

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<sup>43</sup> PP 1826(353) Returns Relating to the Slave Population in the West Indies, No.12, Tortola enclosure, No.2; T71/371 Virgin Slave Register, 1822.

**Table 2.9** Percentage of Slaves on the Pickering Estates, 1822.

Age	Male	Female	Total
0-4	10.4	6.7	8.3
5-9	14.7	12.6	13.5
10-14	9.5	9.6	9.6
15-19	6.6	8.9	7.9
20-24	7.6	9.6	8.7
25-29	12.8	8.5	10.4
30-34	10.9	11.9	11.4
35-39	7.1	4.8	5.8
40-44	3.8	3.7	3.7
45-49	3.3	7.8	5.8
50-54	5.2	5.9	5.6
55-59	4.3	1.5	2.7
60-64	2.4	2.6	2.5
65-69	1.0	2.6	1.9
70+	0.5	3.3	2.1
Total	100	100	100

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Trade Database

Thus, we can see, based on the statistics outlined above, Pickering had a very able work force which, in spite of a slightly higher number of deaths over births in the period 1818-1822 (bearing in mind that some of the deaths might have been attributed to the 1819 hurricane), were on the way to becoming self-sustaining. In a way, the percentage of children in the population seems to indicate a growing level of stability and indirectly points to the ability of the parents to maintain their children, considering that by the period under review, the slaves in the colony were largely responsible for subsisting themselves. Here again, we should bear in mind the point made earlier, that the reduced economic position of the planters had a positive impact on the material condition of the enslaved, in that they were better placed to provide for themselves. Therefore, Pickering's declaration that his estate was not profitable and information that confirmed that the enslaved on the estate had every Thursday to themselves, which might have been in addition to the usual time of Saturday and Sunday, to attend to their provision

grounds, we can conclude that situation on the Pickering estates with respect to the improved material conditions of the enslaved, was not different to other estates in the Virgin Islands.

Pickering, like the other planters in the Virgin Islands, was not concerned about the growing economic viability of their slaves as the plantations were developed to make money for the owners and not make life easier for the enslaved. In spite of the opposition of the enslaved, Pickering was determined to achieve his goal of transferring his operations to Trinidad where he could ensure the level of profits he desired. By using the authority of the courts, a message was sent to all the slaves in the colony that their master's rule was supreme and that it was useless for them to object to the transfers. The slave holders were not the least bit concerned about the social disruption that was being caused by the transfer of slaves within or outside of the colony.

The episode of the Pickering slaves, however, was not closed, as on January 13, 1832 it was reported that slaves on two estates in Trinidad had staged a work stoppage. The reason given by the slaves for their action was that when they were transported to Trinidad 10 years prior they agreed to the move because their master had promised to give them their freedom after seven years. The time had since passed and the slaves had no intention of continuing to work. The slaves in question were in fact the Pickering slaves. In assessing the situation, the Governor of Trinidad was of the opinion that there might have been some truth to the claim, as he did not think it was possible to have removed that many slaves from Tortola without making some concessions since the colony did not have the military strength to support such actions. Thus, the Governor ordered an investigation into the matter to give the slaves an opportunity to present their



case. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate any information with regards to the investigation and its findings.<sup>44</sup>

### **Martin Estate**

Another group of estates in the Virgin Islands that were affected by external transfer were the Martin estates. Martin, a successful planter who inherited a small estate from his father in the 1700s, died on November 28, 1818 leaving five well stocked estates; Joes Hill, Edney, Brewers Bay, Richmond and Shannon. These estates, which had a total of about 700 slaves, were considered the finest in the Virgin Islands: and along with other uncultivated lands, buildings and other personal property were valued at about £113,000. Martin never married but fathered several children by some of his slaves to whom he willed his estate. As the heirs to the estate were quite young at the time of Martin's death, his Executors, Abraham Chalwill Hill and John Hanley assumed responsibility for the running of the estates. On September 21, 1819 when Chalwill Hill died in a hurricane, Hanley became the sole Executor of the estates. The following year Martin's oldest son Henry Martin, who was being educated in Glasgow died and the property was placed in Chancery with Hanley as the Receiver. On 30 August 1821, Hanley also died and the executors of his estate took control of the Martin property sparking a lengthy legal battle that resulted in the dislocation of the slaves on several of the estates.<sup>45</sup>

At the time of Martin's death, there was a total of £9,821 that was charged against his estate. By 1823, as a result of poor management of the estate by the Executors, the level of indebtedness had risen to about £50,501. Following a ruling of the court in 1823 requiring that the debt be settled, the Executors decided to sell the gangs of slaves on

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<sup>44</sup> PP1831-32(279)(649) Grant to Goderich, 13 January 1832.

<sup>45</sup> CO 239/11 Narrative of the Proceedings on George Martin's Property, Petition to The Honourable The Earl of Bathurst by Boice Martin, 1 August 1824.

two of the five estates. Prior to this decision, Mr. Armstrong, who was the long-standing manager of the estates, left because of differences with the Receiver. This action prompted a protest by the slaves on the estate. They quit their work and a large number of them followed Armstrong into the Town, probably to the office of the master of chancery, lamenting that they were being made to suffer because their master was dead. This experience was not entirely new to the enslaved on Martin's estates as 176 of them were purchased by Martin in 1818 after the death of the owner John Rymer and relocated to Tortola from the island of Spanish Town. Armstrong's continued management of the estates after the death of Martin would have allowed for a level of continuity in the lives of the enslaved. His removal from the position was seen by them as linked to the uncertainty and disruption which many of them had experienced before. While the records indicated that from the period 13 September 1821 to 14 April 1823, the executors of the estates shipped about 300 hogsheads of sugar and sixty puncheon of rum to England and utilized other quantities of produce locally to cover operating expenses, the estates were considered unproductive.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

**Table 2.10** Percentages of Slaves on the Martins Estates, 1825.

<b>Age</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>0-4</b>	12.0	9.3	10.7
<b>5-9</b>	9.4	10.6	10.0
<b>10-14</b>	8.7	9.9	9.3
<b>15-19</b>	13.0	7.6	10.3
<b>20-24</b>	13.0	9.6	11.3
<b>25-29</b>	9.4	13.6	11.5
<b>30-34</b>	8.4	12.9	10.7
<b>35-39</b>	6.7	7.6	7.2
<b>40-44</b>	3.3	4.0	3.7
<b>45-49</b>	4.4	2.7	3.5
<b>50-54</b>	2.3	4.3	3.3
<b>55-59</b>	3.0	3.6	3.3
<b>60-64</b>	3.0	1.7	2.3
<b>65-69</b>	2.3	1.7	2.0
<b>70+</b>	1.0	1.0	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	100

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

In 1824, of the 601 enslaved persons on the five combined estates belonging to George Martin, there were 302 females (50.2 %) and 299 males (49.8 %). The enslaved persons on the estates who comprised the prime working group represented over 50 per cent of the overall population with the number of women being slightly higher than men. While children on the estate under the age of 14 made up close to 30 per cent of the overall population, adults over the age of 45 accounted for just over 15 per cent. The small percentage of enslaved persons in the older and supernumerary category resulted in a relatively young population with an average age of 25 years. These figures then indicate that the enslaved population on the Martin estates was stable, balanced and well suited to natural growth. An interesting observation of the Martin slaves is that compared to the general population in the Virgin Islands where the percentage of females surviving to old age was higher than males, on the Martin estate it was the opposite way around (overall females outnumbered males on the estate). For example while 2.10 per cent of

the females on the estate were over the age of 60, the percentage of men the similar category was 6.35 per cent (Table 2.10).<sup>47</sup>

On 5 July 1824, the gangs of slaves which comprised the Martin's Joes Hill and Edney estates, numbering some 286, were put up for sale by public auction. As there were no bidders on that day, the auction was postponed until the following day when 86 of the slaves were purchased by John Dalzell from St Vincent. Four days later these individuals were shipped from Tortola. In November of that same year, Dalzell returned to the Virgin Islands and purchased additional stocks of the Martin slaves, who were also shipped to St Vincent. In total, 135 slaves from Martin's estates were shipped overseas and a number were sold locally to different persons. As the entire gang of slaves was not sold as a single lot but subjected to bids based on the needs or means of the purchasers, there would have been separation of some of the families, adding to their distress. The original Rymer slaves whom Martin acquired on the death of their master suffered the brunt of this indignity as they comprised a substantial proportion of the slaves who were shipped to St Vincent.<sup>48</sup>

### **Threlfall Estate**

Yet another slave owner in the Virgin Islands who showed very little concern for the social stability of her slaves was Elizabeth Threlfall. Unlike Pickering who forcibly removed his slaves to Trinidad, Threlfall wanted permission to use them as transient workers on her estate on the neighbouring Danish island of St John. At the time of Threlfall's request, there were 125 slaves on her estate. The ratio of males to females was almost 1:1 but the age profile of the population was not conducive to natural growth. For example, while females in the main productive age group (age 15–44)

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<sup>47</sup> T71/372 Virgin Islands Slave Register, 1825

<sup>48</sup> Ibid; PP 1826(353) Returns relating to the Slave Population in the West Indies, Folio No. 12 Tortola, Enclosure No.1, (1826), 686.

comprised 31 per cent of the female population, they were far outnumbered by males in the same age group who made up close to 55 per cent of the males in the population. Close to 32 per cent of the females were also in the group of elderly or supernumerary slaves as opposed to 13 per cent of males in the population who survived to old age. The future for the population was, however, not all hopeless as children under the age of 14 made up 30 per cent of the overall population (Table 2.11).<sup>49</sup>

**Table 2.11** Percentages of Slaves on the Threlfall Estate, 1825.

Age	Male	Female	Total
0-4	11.3	14.3	12.8
5-9	12.9	9.5	11.2
10-14	8.1	4.8	6.4
15-19	9.7	11.1	10.4
20-24	12.9	4.8	8.8
25-29	11.3	1.6	6.4
30-34	8.1	9.5	8.8
35-39	4.8	9.5	7.2
40-44	8.1	3.2	5.6
45-49	1.6	4.8	3.2
50-54	4.8	6.4	5.6
55-59	0.0	4.8	2.4
60-64	0.0	1.6	0.8
65-69	3.2	7.9	5.6
70+	3.2	6.4	4.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

As was the general view with regards to the Virgin Islands economy, Threlfall was of the firm belief that her estate on Tortola could no longer produce sufficient crops to support herself and her slaves. The proposed course of action was seen as the only means available to her to prevent her slaves and herself from starving. She described her

<sup>49</sup>C.O.239/9 Threlfall to Earl Bathurst, 16 July 1823.

St John estate as comprising new land with rich soil, the same terms used in connection with the new colonies of Trinidad and Guyana to where other slave owners in the old colonies were moving their slaves. So as to alleviate fears that the slaves would be moved permanently to St John, Threlfall proposed to keep the slaves registered on Tortola and continue to pay any and all taxes on them there. However, she did not indicate how many of the slaves she intended to move and for what period of time.<sup>50</sup> While there is nothing in the records stating that Threlfall's request was denied, correspondence indicates that the situation remained unchanged for some time. It should also be noted that Threlfall's request fell outside of the scope of the law as she was seeking permission to transport her slaves, not to another British colony but to a foreign colony, a move which was expressly forbidden.<sup>51</sup>

In a statement dated 13 March 1827, Threlfall again laid her case before the British Government. A new strategy was employed as she lobbied the British Parliament for the inclusion of a specific amendment in the Slave Trade Abolition Act which was to come before the House of Commons. Under the existing act, mentioned earlier, slaves who were employed as domestics, seamen and fishermen were permitted to move among colonies with some stipulation. On this basis, Threlfall was seeking a similar concession for her agricultural slaves. The argument that was put forward and supported by friends of Threlfall was that: "This was a right which she and her ancestors had exercised from the first settlement of the Virgin Islands and of which she was unjustly deprived by the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, after St John had reverted to Danish rule."<sup>52</sup>

Threlfall's request drew extensive criticism from the Anti-Slavery lobby in England, who felt that by her own admission she was in violation of the law with respect to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> C.O.239/26 Statement of a Case of particular hardship – Elizabeth Threlfall, 13 March, 1827.

slave trade and she was now seeking permission to continue in her illegal act. The whole affair was seen as yet another way in which the enslaved were being exploited. The abolitionists who were familiar with the Pickering's case and vowed to keep a vigilant eye on the situation and lobby against any such move. In the end, no such provision was made in amendments to the Act and as a result Threlfall was not given the permission she so desperately requested to move her slaves freely between her two estates.<sup>53</sup>

Undaunted, Threlfall sought other ways to move her slaves as she wished. She had resolved to use the existing provision under the law that permitted the movement of certain slaves: domestics and mariners. On occasions, Threlfall would seek clearance from custom officials to sail from Tortola to the Danish Island of St John with up to six slaves: two listed as domestics and four as seamen. While the open vessel used by Threlfall was not licensed for travel outside of the colony, customs officials accommodated and facilitated her even though they were uncomfortable with the arrangement. The officials, however, had further cause for concern since reports reaching the office alleged that the slaves so transported by Threlfall were being worked on her estate in St. John.<sup>54</sup>

On October 19, 1829 when Threlfall applied to customs officials for clearance to sail to St John with her slaves, whom she categorised as seamen and domestics, the officer expressed his reluctance to sign the document. Threlfall was advised that she needed to take that matter up with the head of the office and as she had come to the office after closing time she needed to return the following Monday when a conference would be held with her and the relevant laws reviewed. Threlfall expressed her dissatisfaction and

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid; Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, 384-392;.

<sup>54</sup> CO239/20 Claxton to Maxwell, 12 October 1829.

informed the officer that she had urgent business in St John and could not wait until Monday. Two days later Threlfall set sail for St John with six of her slaves as she had originally planned. About two weeks later, on Saturday 3 November, two of the slaves, Charles and Jenny, who accompanied Threlfall to St John, returned to Tortola and told the custom agent that they were sent over with a letter, probably by Threlfall, and that they had no intention of returning to St John. On being questioned by custom officials the slaves revealed that their mistress had beaten them badly and that they were worked as slaves while in St John. The slaves were therefore immediately seized by the customs agent and an investigation started.<sup>55</sup>

On Monday 5<sup>th</sup> November, Threlfall returned to Tortola with the other four slaves who subsequently made the same allegation about being worked as slaves in St. John. These slaves were also seized. In an interview by customs officials, Threlfall denied the slaves' claim and stated that if they were worked while they were in St John, it was not with her knowledge. The slaves were then brought before their mistress and they again made the claim. In this whole ordeal no charges were brought against Threlfall for what was considered a criminal act. The response was directed towards the slaves who were seized based on the action of their owner.<sup>56</sup>

Uncertain about how to proceed in the matter, Mr Claxton, the custom agent, informed Governor Maxwell about the situation and sought his advice and direction. The Governor directed the agent to investigate the matter thoroughly and to submit all evidence to Mr Woodcock, the King's Council in the colony, who would determine if there was sufficient evidence to proceed with the case. Woodcock advised that there was no evidence on which to hold two of the slaves, Kelly and William Fisher, who were considered domestic slaves, but on the other hand four slaves, Nicholas, Nero,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



Little Jenny and Charles, were to be forfeited on the grounds that they were employed on their owner's buildings and lands in St John.<sup>57</sup>

The legal debate which followed regarding the case seemed to overlook one salient point: on October 21<sup>st</sup> when Threlfall embarked on her journey with the slaves she did not have any clearance from customs (which would have constituted permission), and as a result, under the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade she had illegally transported the slaves to a foreign port. On these grounds, Threlfall could have been arrested and charged with felony. One Law Lord in England was very critical of the Governor's involvement and felt that the customs official should be given a free hand when prosecuting cases of that nature. It was felt that the law was clear on how such matters should be handled.<sup>58</sup>

In spite of the legal provisions, the customs officials in the Virgin Islands had reasons to be cautious as in another case a few years earlier, there had been oversights or procedural errors where several slaves who were seized by customs had to be returned to their owner when the ruling was over-turned. In that case, another planter, Abraham C. Hill, who like Threlfall also owned an estate on St John and moved slaves between them, had eight slaves seized on the grounds that they were transported to St John and worked as slaves. A conviction was secured but was over-turned on appeal because the charges filed in the case were under the wrong act of parliament.<sup>59</sup>

In Threlfall's case, custom officials were more successful and through their vigilance had put an end to the slave owner's only means of moving slaves between the two estates. Thus, after having exhausted every possible avenue to obtain permission to

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<sup>57</sup> CO239/20 Maxwell to Claxton, 19 Oct. 1829.

<sup>58</sup> CO239/20 Woodcock to Claxton 24 Oct. 1829, Maxwell to Murry 24 Dec. 1829 including comments.

<sup>59</sup> Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, 392.

utilize her Tortola slaves on St John, Threlfall seemingly gave up the idea and with support of her friends put forward one other alternative. In correspondences dated 8 May and 14 July 1831, Mary Shute, the individual who held the mortgage on Threlfall's estate, requested that permission be given for Threlfall to move her slaves to Trinidad. This request on the part of Shute did not hide the fact that her only concern was recouping her own investment as she clearly stated that in Trinidad the slaves could be sold for their true value, thereby making it possible for the mortgage on the estate to be paid off. Shute felt that while the slaves remained on Tortola they constituted an unprofitable burden on Threlfall and she recommended that an order in council be passed to allow the move.<sup>60</sup>

Further, Shute claimed that the slaves had already indicated their willingness to relocate on the condition that they were so directed by the Government. That willingness, she claimed, was expressed by the slaves to their pastor, one of the Methodist missionaries stationed in the Virgin Islands.<sup>61</sup> Even at that late stage (1831), it was evident that the stage was again being set to affect the move of another group of slaves from the Virgin Islands by whatever means possible. However, unlike in the case of the Pickering slaves the matter died a natural death and the slaves were allowed to continue living in the Virgin Islands.

## **Summary**

The rate of internal and external transfers of slaves in the Virgin Islands, which was considered high in relation to the transfers in other colonies in the British Caribbean, resulted in major dislocation of a large percentage of the slave population. Movement between estates, among islands or between colonies all resulted in a growing sense of

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<sup>60</sup> CO239 Shute to Goodrich, 8 May & 14 July 1831.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

dislocation on the part of the enslaved. As in other British Caribbean colonies, the rates of transfers were found to be directly related to the poor performance of the colony's economy based on the reduced fertility of the soil after prolonged cultivation of sugar cane. Interestingly though, it was discovered that in the case of the Virgin Islands, the declining economic prospects of the planters resulted in the availability of more land and time for the enslaved to subsist themselves. Unlike in the situation of the planters, the enslaved benefitted greatly from their efforts and became attached and dependent on the soil for their daily existence. Attempts to remove these individuals from the existence which over time they had crafted and developed against all odds, was met with opposition and resistance. In particular, the disruption caused by the regional transfers was so great that there was high probability that violence would erupt. If restrictions were not imposed curtailing the interregional movement of slaves, the majority of the slaves in the Virgin Islands would have been relocated elsewhere in the Caribbean. This level of uncertainty to all indications prompted the enslaved to renew their efforts in obtaining their freedom through manumission. This will be dealt with in the following chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Manumissions

This chapter examines the rate of manumission in the Virgin Islands during the final decades of slavery. The modes of manumission used in the colony will be investigated taking into consideration the defining characteristics of the slaves: age, sex, and skin colour. In determining the slaves' direct or indirect involvement in their manumissions, the relationships between the slaves and their masters and other free individuals which led to or facilitated their manumission, will also be examined.

In the 1820s the leading legal counsel in the Virgin Islands questioned the readiness of slaves in the colony to receive freedom when he declared that 'Freedom [had] yet to open a normal school' in the colony. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the process of manumission provided a legal avenue through which freedom could be attained by individuals while the institution of slavery itself remained. Within this context, however, a change in status (from slave to free) was not accompanied by certain social rites. Thus freedmen were only accorded a second class position in the free society. Notwithstanding the limited form of freedom that manumissions conferred, the enslaved in the Virgin Islands, as in other areas of the British Caribbean, aspired to achieve it. This fact was not overlooked by the slave owners who used manumission, or the promise of it, as an incentive to develop trust and loyalty among their enslaved workers. However, such aspirations on the part of the enslaved were not only focused on gratuitous manumission, as the practice of self-purchase was firmly established and utilized by the enslaved.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters from the Virgin Islands: Illustrating Life and Manners in the West Indies*. (1842), 227-229; Beckles, 2002, 205, 281; Handler, 1974, 28; John F. Campbell, "How Free is Free? The Limits of Manumission for Enslaved Africans" in *Eighteenth-Century British West Indian Sugar Society in Paths to Freedom Manumission in the Atlantic World*, eds. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press 2009), 151; Barry W. Higman, *Slave Population of the British Caribbean 1807-1834* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press 1984), 388; Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), 220.

Thus in the Virgin Islands, the growing numbers of freedmen in the population supported, encouraged and even facilitated the manumission of their enslaved friends and family members. In this context, the enslaved recognised that while manumission facilitated a legal change in status it was primarily a social process that was initiated and supported by varying types of relationships.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Process of Manumission**

In the British Caribbean, while the process of manumission was highly selective, the enslaved saw it as the means through which they were able to escape servitude and pursue a life of their own. Throughout the period of slavery, some slaves did achieve that goal and established a growing, free black community in the process. The planters hoped that manumitted individuals in the slave society would act as role models for the enslaved, motivating them to be 'good' in the hope of achieving a similar reward. Barry Higman observed that, in the British Caribbean, there was an increase in rates of manumissions after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. This increase, which was most visible in the final decades of slavery, seemed to have been influenced by several factors identified by Higman as: 'the reduction or removal of fees; the growth of the creole population; the growth of the freedman population; and the spread of the working out system.'<sup>3</sup>

While there is no doubt that the final decision to grant manumissions remained in the hands of slave owners, we cannot overlook the increased involvement of the enslaved in this vital process that directly affected their status. Indeed, in this period of general

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<sup>2</sup>Branan-Shute, "Approaching Freedom: The Manumission of Slaves in Suriname, 1760-1828," *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 10, No. 3, (1989), 40; Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "Freedom and Oppression of Slaves in the Eighteenth-Century Caribbean," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 59, No.6 (1992), 921-22.

<sup>3</sup>Higman, *Slave Population*, 380; John F. Campbell, "How Free is Free?", 152.

increased manumission, there was also growth in the number of manumissions granted with respect to self-purchase as opposed to gratuitous manumissions. In spite of these rather general observations, in the British Caribbean, manumission continued to be granted based on the specific circumstances of individual colonies, in particular individual slave holders. Hence, there was a wide range of experiences across the British Caribbean. These differences seem to be best understood when the demographic structures of the manumitted slaves are examined in conjunction with the modes of manumission that were utilized.<sup>4</sup>

In the Virgin Islands, as in the wider British Caribbean, manumission was achieved through three main routes: by deed, by purchase and by will. The most widely celebrated act of manumission in the Virgin Islands occurred in 1776, when Samuel and Mary Nottingham, who were Quakers, left the Virgin Islands to reside in Long Island, New York, eventually freeing the slaves they left behind. In a deed dated 30 June 1776, the Nottinghams freed a total of 25 slaves and gave them an estate comprising 50 acres of land to be held as tenants in common. In addition to noting that freedom was the natural right of his slaves, Nottingham also stated in the conveyance that he was moved by his personal conviction, as he felt that it was wrong to hold individuals enslaved.<sup>5</sup>

To aid in the care and maintenance of the slaves, especially the elderly, Nottingham's sister, Ms Hannah Abbott, left a legacy of 176 Joes or £316.16 sterling for the group. After freeing the slaves, Nottingham continued to show concern for their wellbeing and in a letter dated 9<sup>th</sup> September 1782, he encouraged them to pay particular attention to improving and cultivating the estate for their own benefit and developing a model community of free people. When it was necessary to raise capital, they were also

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>5</sup> Vernon Pickering, *Early History of the British Virgin Islands: From Columbus to Emancipation* Third Edition (Falcon Publications International 2000), 124-127.

encouraged to hire themselves out for specific periods, but in all things they should live in unity, care for each other and maintain a good relationship with all their neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

At the time of the manumission of the Nottingham slaves, there were no laws in the Virgin Islands governing the management of slaves in general or the process of manumission in particular.<sup>7</sup> This lack of regulations governing the process of manumission was not unique to the Virgin Islands, as across the British Caribbean legislators facilitated or impeded the process through the imposition of fees if and when the need arose. Bryan Edwards, a planter in Jamaica, was of the opinion that no specific laws were needed to regulate manumissions as the courts would no doubt uphold the process as directly related to property rights. Therefore, when manumissions were granted, the slave owner simply gave up his right to the slave and in turn transferred that right to the slave. The manumission process in itself assumed that there existed beforehand an established relationship that had enabled the former master to see the slave as an individual capable of exercising responsibility for him or herself and being able to live as a free person.<sup>8</sup>

It should also be observed that in addition to his earlier stated moral conviction with regards to slavery, Nottingham also give as reasons for the manumitting of his slaves, “diverse other good causes” and the consideration of the sum of £5 paid by the slaves. The sum paid represented a tangible involvement on the part of the slaves in the process that led to their being set free. This change in status along with the grant of land placed the slaves on sure footing and enabled them to care for themselves. When Samuel

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> PP (1789) Copies of Several Acts for the Regulation of Slaves Passed in the West Indies, Tortola, No. 12 ‘An Act for the Government of Negro and other slave,’ (1783).

<sup>8</sup> Bryan Edwards, *The History Civil and Commercial of the British West Indies*, Vol. II, (1819), 23; Jerome S. Handler and John T. Pohlmann, “Slave Manumissions and Freedmen in Seventeenth-Century Barbados,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, Vol. 41 No. 3 (July 1984), 394.

Nottingham and his wife left the Virgin Islands, there was no indication that anyone was left in charge of the slaves and it seems probable that during that interim period, before the deed was executed, the slaves proved themselves worthy. Also, considering that the Nottingham slaves comprised a mixed group of individuals, they would have had to come together to consider their owner's offer and collectively contribute towards the sum paid in exchange for their freedom. Nottingham's choice of words used to describe his reason for manumitting the slaves (and for 'diverse other good' causes and consideration) and the fact that he also bequeathed to them an estate, suggests that there was a cordial relationship between himself and the slaves which partly guided the decision.<sup>9</sup>

Ten years after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, a total of 168 slaves were manumitted in the Virgin Islands (Table 3.1). When this figure is compared to manumissions for the period 1800-1807 when a total of about 198 manumissions were recorded, there is a clear indication of a reduction.<sup>10</sup> This seems to indicate that after the abolition of the slave trade, slave owners were more reluctant to release their bondsmen knowing that they could not easily replace them. A closer look at the figures in Table 3.1 reveals that there were obvious surges and declines in manumissions with regard to specific years or groups of years. However, because the number of manumissions were relatively small it is difficult to determine what the contributing factors were. In fact, in such a situation, the figures could shift one way or another because the decision to manumit or not manumit a slave or group of slaves was dependent on any one slave owner.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pickering, *Early History*, 125

<sup>10</sup> Virgin Islands Archives: Index to the deed book 1792-1839.

<sup>11</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 381.



**Table 3.1** Manumissions 1808-1817

<b>Year</b>	<b>Will</b>	<b>Deed</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1808</b>	14	12	<b>26</b>
<b>1809</b>	4	17	<b>21</b>
<b>1810</b>	2	11	<b>13</b>
<b>1811</b>	6	5	<b>11</b>
<b>1812</b>	2	4	<b>6</b>
<b>1813</b>	1	4	<b>5</b>
<b>1814</b>	3	6	<b>9</b>
<b>1815</b>	2	9	<b>11</b>
<b>1816</b>	22	15	<b>37</b>
<b>1817</b>	8	21	<b>29</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>168</b>

Source: C.O.239/8 Slave Returns

Table 3.1 also shows that 38 per cent of the manumissions were by will of the slave owners as opposed to 62 per cent by deed. This higher percentage of manumissions by deed seems to indicate – as was observed across the British Caribbean – that after 1807 there was a greater tendency for slaves to be more directly involved in their own manumission, at times with the help of free relatives and friends.<sup>12</sup> The absence of detailed information on these manumissions does not allow us to determine if any of the deeds were issued in response to self-purchase agreements between individual slaves and their masters. In the years 1812 and 1813 when the number of manumissions recorded was at its lowest, the Registrar of Deeds reported that for the first time in the colony's history a tax was being imposed on manumissions. The tax (£6.12 shillings on every manumission), which came into effect in 1812, was to raise funds to pay an annuity to Jane Turnbull the widow of William Turnbull, former President of the colony. During the period while the tax was being imposed – this was until the death of Turnbull in September 1813 – the footnotes to the records stated that only 14 persons paid the required amount, with others refusing to register their manumissions. However,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the statistics presented show that 11 manumissions were registered for the years 1812 and 1813 bringing into question the reliability of the information submitted.<sup>13</sup>

This situation was clearly identified, by Barry Higman, as a common occurrence across the British Caribbean as he found that colonial records were not always reliable as a result of under reporting to avoid paying taxes.<sup>14</sup> There are also the concerns that while some of the manumissions would have been recorded later, there might have been some that would not have been recorded at all, further distorting the actual number of manumissions that were granted in the colony during the period. While the deed book for the Virgin Islands did not survive, the index to the books is still available. When this index was reviewed, information there closely reflected the statistics that were submitted to the Colonial Office. However there seemed to be some omissions, as further colonial records revealed that in 1811, Percival, a slave owner on one of the Cays in the Virgin Islands, manumitted his 17 slaves. These slaves, nine males and eight females, were also given 300 acres of land on Guana Island complete with crops, stocks and houses. While no information was given about the relationship that existed between Percival and his slaves, it can be assumed that he must have thought very highly of them to have given them such a gift; a gift which they, no doubt, consciously worked hard to obtain.<sup>15</sup>

Table 3.1 also shows that for the period from 1808 to 1817, the largest annual amount of manumissions was in 1816 when a total of 37 slaves were set free. Of that number 20 were manumitted by the last Will and Testament of Mirian Harragin, a widow residing on the island of Great Camanoe. In addition to receiving their freedom, the slaves were

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<sup>13</sup> C.O. 239/8 Maxwell to Earl Bathurst, 1 May 1822.

<sup>14</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 379.

<sup>15</sup> Virgin Islands Archives, Index to the deed book 1792 – 1839; CO239/4 Colquham to The Earl Bathurst, 26 January 1820.

also bequeathed 40 acres of land on Great Camanoe. Population statistics for the Virgin Islands show that in 1815 there was only one white person living on the island of Great Camanoe in addition to a number of slaves and a few free blacks. This information leads us to conclude that Harragin was probably totally dependent on her slaves and as part of their economic focus was fishing, they would have functioned with a certain level of freedom. As such it is likely that a close, trusting relationship would have developed between Harragin and her slaves, which in turn might have motivated her, not only to free them, but to give them the property on which they lived and worked together. The slaves were therefore rewarded for their loyalty and faithful service by their mistress' actions, which on the part of the slaves was no doubt a conscious effort.<sup>16</sup>

Statistics compiled from the slave register 1818-1834 provide a unique opportunity to analyse the demographic structure of the slaves that were manumitted during the period and also allows us to identify trends that may or may not be specific to the Virgin Islands. As can be seen from the examples cited earlier, slaves in the Virgin Islands like in other colonies in the British Caribbean, were manumitted through the three modes: by will, by deed and by purchase. Manumissions by Will expressed the direct wish or instructions of the slave owner which were carried out by his heirs or the executor of his or her estate. In this process, the slave remained in his or her master's service up until the death of their master. Since the slave may or may not have prior knowledge of the master's intentions, it would be anticipated that the slave would be motivated to remain loyal and faithful in carrying out whatever duties were assigned.<sup>17</sup>

In the majority of cases, a last Will and Testament was a written document containing the wishes of an individual, but there were also instances where such instructions were

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<sup>16</sup> CO239/4 Colquham to The Earl Bathurst, 26 January 1820.

<sup>17</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death, A Comparative Study* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1982), 220.

given verbally on a 'death bed.' Such was the case with John, a 36 year old slave on Tortola, who was manumitted on the dying wish of his mistress, Ann Crabbe, in the period 1818-1822. There were also occasions when a Will dictated conditions or further service before manumission could be received. That was the situation in which Jackey, a 36 year old blacksmith, on Tortola found himself when he was willed to John Dracot with the condition that he would be freed upon Dracot's death. Thus when Dracot died in 1822, Jackey was manumitted.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, manumission by deed allowed the master to free his slave while he was still alive, permitting the development of a different type of relationship between ex-master and ex-slave. In some cases, the same reasons that were given for granting freedom to individual slaves by a last will and testament were also used when deeds of gift were utilized as a means to set slaves at liberty. In these cases, manumission was used as a management tool by slave owners, as the promise of manumission or the possibility of obtaining it would become an incentive or motivator to work or behave as desired. The practice also aided the development of a sense of loyalty to the former owner and in colonies where the number of white persons were dwindling, these individuals helped bolster the support of the white planters.<sup>19</sup>

The third mode of manumission involved the purchase of freedom based on the price set by the slave owner. Purchase of freedom was characterised by two distinct options: self-purchase and purchase by friends or family members. Self-purchase, in particular, assumed a certain amount of industry on the part of the slave that allowed for the accumulation of the money needed to carry out the transaction. This mode of freedom was pursued by slaves who found themselves in positions where they were able to sell

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<sup>18</sup> PP 1825 (155) II Slave Trade No. 2, Mr Dougan's Report (1825), 36-41.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell, "How Free is Free?", 143-159.

their services or goods on the open market. These individuals “boasted possession of an independent character, which they held up by way of social distinction.” Clearly these individuals were already given a certain amount of freedom which allowed them to be able to pursue their own interests and accumulate the sums of money necessary to purchase their own freedom.<sup>20</sup> In the following chapter, we will look at this issue in more detail as we examine how the enslaved developed their autonomy.

In Barbados, however, there was evidence to indicate that white slave owners were not always comfortable with the practice that allowed slaves to purchase their own freedom, since invariably it was the most valuable and useful slaves who were affected. This being the case, there were slave owners who simply concluded that the request for self-purchase was “an act of defiance, insubordination, and outright rebellion.” This meant that as the slave contemplated his approach to his master on the issue of self-purchase, he needed to enter into careful negotiation appealing to his master’s humanity and rely on the relationship that had been developed between them before hand. In Beckles opinion, ‘When the enslaved was able to accumulate sufficient capital for self-purchase a discourse of subservience and submission was still necessary in order to secure the enslaver’s compliance and agreement.’<sup>21</sup>

On the Pickering estates on Tortola - which had a combined total slave population of close to 500 - only one slave was recorded as being manumitted after the commencement of the general slave registration. That slave, Jeffery Pickering age 42, was a blacksmith on Josiah Bay Estate and was described by John Stabo as very intelligent and hard working. Stabo, who at one time was the attorney for the Josiah Bay

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<sup>20</sup> Hilary McD. Beckles, “Freedom Without Liberty: Free Blacks in Barbados Slave System” in *Slavery Without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society Since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* ed. Verene A. Shepherd (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2002), 207-208.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 208.

Estate, reported that one day he met Jeffery and about twenty slaves loading wood onto two boats during their lunch hour. Jeffery informed Stabo that one of the boats belonged to his wife Diana, a free woman on the Nottingham Estate, and that the wood was being sent to a market in St Thomas where they would get ready cash. Jeffery was also said to have owned a large shingled house on the Nottingham Estate where he lived with Diana and their six children. In 1823 when Isaac Pickering proposed to transfer his slaves to Trinidad, Jeffery was not prepared to part with his family so he made arrangement to purchase his freedom. To accomplish this objective, a free coloured woman, Catherine Fraser, was used as an intermediary. She purchased Jeffrey from John Pickering, the executor for the estate and transferred the title to Diana, Jeffrey's wife, who in turn manumitted him.<sup>22</sup> This example shows that self-purchase was not always straightforward but the slaves found the best possible way to achieve their desire. Of the 32 manumissions recorded as self-purchase in the Virgin Islands in the year 1822, at least one involved the transfer of the slave to another free person who in turn manumitted the individual. In that particular case, Betsey Smith aged 50, paid £66 for her release from slavery. While we are not certain of the exact sequence of events, Betsey was transferred from Anthony Millard, owner of the Carrot Bay Estate on Tortola, to Michael Fraser a white slave owner who in turn manumitted her. These examples reflect a range of approaches that were used by the enslaved in their attempt to execute self-purchase agreements. While the record is silent on why each method was used, we can conclude that the enslaved utilized the method that was best suited to his or her circumstance.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> PP1825(114) Papers Relating to Captured Negroes (1825), 348; PP1825(115) II Slave Trade No.3 Major Moody's Report (1825), 119 & 123.

T372 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1822

<sup>23</sup> PP 1825 (155) II Slave Trade, No.2 Mr. Dougan's Report; T71/372 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1822.

In the Virgin Islands there appears to have been no set price for slaves who wished to enter into self-purchase agreements and as such the agreed price might have been subject to negotiations. As a result of this situation, slaves paid a range of prices for their freedom, from minimal amounts of 5s to £160. The slave who was recorded as paying the highest redemption cost was Sam Beel, a 24 year old sailor on the Sea Cows Bay Estate. Beel, who was probably among the elite slaves, would have had a certain amount of freedom and opportunity to use his skills in his spare time to make money, as the records reveal that he owned a small vessel which he used for fishing and trading. The amount paid by Beel shows how valuable he was to his owner. Among the female slaves, the largest amount paid in self purchase agreements was £100. That was the figure paid by two female slaves, Teresa Molineux age 21 and Kitty Barrow age 23, on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1819 to secure their freedom. Both women, who lived in Road Town, the colony's capital, were seamstresses and cake makers.<sup>24</sup>

During the period 1821-1825, 54 per cent of the manumissions by deeds in the Virgin Islands were self-purchases and in the years 1825-1828 the number had increased to 57 per cent. This indicates that increasingly slaves in the Virgin Islands were finding themselves in positions where they were taking an active part in their own manumission, sometimes with the help of other freedmen. In Chapter 2, we observed that while the Virgin Islands' economy was declining, the material condition of the enslaved was improving because more land and time became available for them to subsist themselves. This situation resulted in the enslaved living lives that were relatively free and obtaining possessions for themselves (this issue of slaves' possessions will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 4). In spite of their relative success, however, one thing remained unchanged in that they were not legally free. This fact, no

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<sup>24</sup> PP 1825 (155) II Slave Trade No.2 Mr Dougan's Report  
T71/372 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1822.

doubt, was driven home to the enslaved when large numbers were uprooted and transported out of the colony on the orders of their masters. In response, it is highly likely that many of the enslaved were propelled into making the decision to seek their freedom through manumission.<sup>25</sup>

### **Rates of Manumission**

In the Virgin Islands, for the period 1818-1834, there was a total of 435 manumissions which, when calculated based on an annual average in relation to the population of 1834, gives a manumission rate of 4.7 per thousand. Higman found that while manumission rates varied among the colonies in the British Caribbean, the colony with the highest manumission rate was the Bahamas, one of the marginal colonies, where the rate of manumission was as high as 6.3 slaves per 1000. When the old sugar colonies – of which the Virgin Islands were a part – are considered, the Virgin Islands had the highest rate of manumissions. That is to say that the slaves in the Virgin Islands had a higher chance of being set free from bondage. Two other old sugar colonies, St. Kitts and Barbados, each had manumission rate of just over 2 slaves per 1000.<sup>26</sup>

The increased rate of manumissions evident in the final decades of slavery was closely linked to several factors. These included the growth of the freedman population and increased opportunities for improving material conditions on the part of the enslaved. These factors were further enhanced or supported by declining economic fortunes and the rate and level of political control that was maintained by the white planters. In short,

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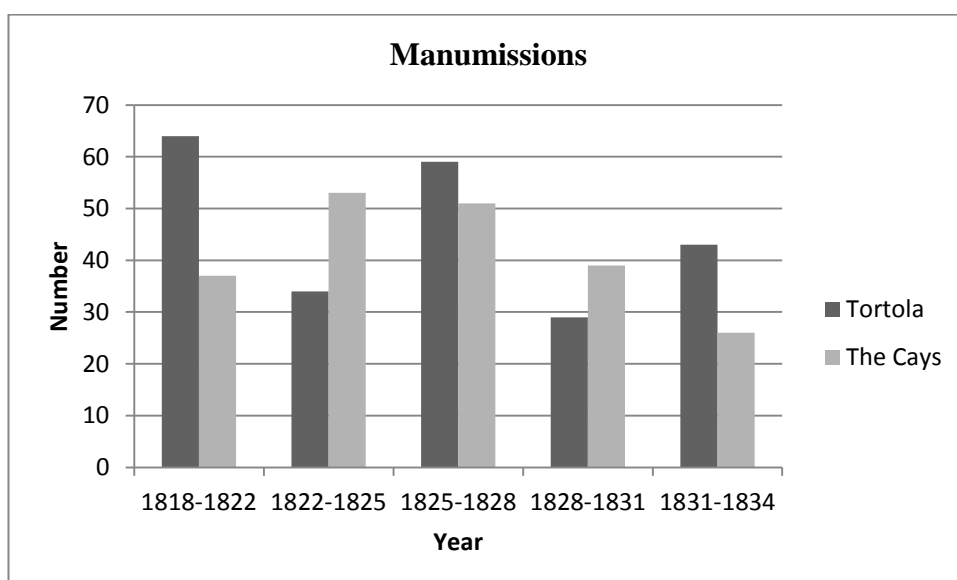
<sup>25</sup> PP 1825 (155) II Slave Trade No.2 Mr Dougan's Report  
C.O.239/22 Slave returns 1825 – 1828.

<sup>26</sup> Higman, *Slave Population*, 379-381; T71/370-375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers, 1818, 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831 & 1834.



as the economic state of colonies deteriorated, so too did the value of slaves which brought the redemption price within manageable reach.<sup>27</sup>

What then were the factors that contributed to the high manumission rate in the Virgin Islands during the period 1818-1834? As discussed in Chapter 2 the Virgin Islands was comprised of two main economic blocs which influenced and affected the lives of slaves in the colony. Firstly, there was Tortola where the main economic focus was sugar and secondly there were the Cays where cotton was the main cash crop supported by other sundry ventures. Up to 75 per cent of the colony's slave population resided on Tortola and the remaining 25 per cent lived on the other, smaller islands in the colony referred to as the Cays. In an attempt to get a detailed picture of the Virgin Islands, manumissions will be examined based on where the slaves lived – on Tortola or on the Cays (See Chapter 1).



**Figure 3.1** Frequency of Manumissions, The Virgin Islands Slave Database

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 380.

Figure 3.1 above shows that the number of slaves manumitted in the colony, were not distributed across the two economic blocs according to the population distribution. In the periods 1818/1822, 1825/1831 and 1831/1834 Tortola had the highest number of manumissions. This was particularly so in the first and last registration periods when there was a difference of 27 manumissions between the two sectors. Even more impressive is the fact that in the period 1822/25 and 1828/31 the number of manumissions on the Cays outnumbered manumissions on the island of Tortola. These figures seem to indicate that there were very high levels of manumissions on the Cays when compared to Tortola, bearing in mind the population distribution of the slaves in the colony. After a decline in the number of manumissions during 1822/1825, there was a noticeable increase in the period 1825/1828 which was a direct result of the dislocation caused by the slave transfers in the period 1822/1825. Clearly, manumission enabled the enslaved to take full responsibility for themselves and remove the threats of relocation that continued to linger within the society (Figure 3.1).

**Table 3.2** Manumission Rate (per 1000)

	1818/22	1822/25	185/228	1828/31	1831/34
<b>Tortola</b>	3.1	2.6	4.4	2.2	3.3
<b>The Cays</b>	6.1	13.9	13	9.1	5.9

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

To get a better understanding of the incidence of manumission within the Virgin Islands, Table 3.2 above shows the annual rates of manumission. Among the enslaved held on the Cays, the manumission rates were consistently higher than among the enslaved on the island of Tortola, even exceeding the colony's average rate of 4.7. Initially, after the enactment of the Slave Registration Act, the first tri-annual return in 1822 revealed that the rate of manumission on the Cays was 6.1. By the second tri-

annual registration in 1825, however, the rate had more than doubled to reach its highest level of 13.9 before gradually declining over the next nine years to reach its lowest point of 5.9 in 1834. On the island of Tortola, which had the largest number of slaves throughout the period, the initial manumission rate revealed by the slave registers in 1822 was 3.1, and unlike the Cays, showed a decline three years later in 1825. The third tri-annual registration, however, saw the manumission rate on Tortola rising to its highest point during the registration period to 4.4. This level of manumission was not sustained as in 1831 the rate fell by half of its value to 2.2 before it rebounded a bit to 3.3 in 1834. These declines could be attributed to the fact that slave holders would have been more inclined to hold on to their slaves, considering that there were serious discussions about compensation. While the declining market in the Virgin Islands reduced the value of slaves to the lowest possible amount, in the region planters were confident that any compensation they were entitled to would have been pegged to overall values in the region (Figure 3.1).<sup>28</sup>

While the slaves in the Virgin Islands had a better chance of manumission than their counterparts in the other old sugar colonies, the chances of attaining freedom in the Virgin Islands were enhanced greatly if the slaves resided on one of the Cays. This trend was also in keeping with observations in the region which link rates of manumission with the economic health of the society and the demand for labour. As established previously, the non-sugar sector of the Cays suffered greatly as a result of the colony's declining economy (Table 3.2).<sup>29</sup>

When the total number of manumissions for all the registration periods was taken into consideration, 55 per cent of the slaves who were manumitted in the Virgin Islands

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<sup>28</sup> Higman, *Slave population*, 113, 46-50.

<sup>29</sup> Higman, *Slave population*, 380-385; Campbell, "How Free is Free", 146

lived on the island of Tortola while the remaining 45 per cent lived on the Cays. Although the slaves living on the Cays were fewer than on Tortola they accounted for a greater proportion of the colony's manumissions.<sup>30</sup> This finding seems to go against observations which indicate that manumission was an urban phenomenon in several slave societies in the British Caribbean. In Barbados, in particular, it was reported that while Bridgetown was home to 12 per cent of the colony's slaves, it accounted for 49 per cent of all manumissions. The urban slave because of his environment had greater opportunities to gain income by using his skills to offer goods and service for sale. Living in urban centres also meant that slaves had ample opportunities to develop intimate or other relationships with slave owners and other free persons that enhanced their chances for manumission.<sup>31</sup>

There is no doubt that similar rationales would stand for slaves living on the Cays in the Virgin Islands for in most, if not all cases, those slaves lived in small holdings working closely with their masters. Early in this chapter, two examples were given where two groups of slaves residing on the Cays were manumitted by their owners and given large quantities of land. Since each small island was a self-contained community, the slaves would have developed skills to ensure their self-sufficiency which were utilized to support themselves and their masters. The proximity of the Cays to the urban centre on the Danish island of St. Thomas and the communication links using small boats, provided a direct market for the enslaved to offer goods for sale and gain ready cash, some of which went towards paying the price for their manumission.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> T71/372-376 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831 & 1834.

<sup>31</sup> Beckles, "Freedom without Liberty", 201; Klein, *African Slavery*, 229; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 269.

<sup>32</sup> PP1825(115) II Slave Trade No.3 Major Moody's Report (1825), 119 & 123.

### Manumissions by Age and Gender

In the period 1818/22 and 1822/25, the percentage of females manumitted on the Cays far outnumbered males (Table 3.3). This section outlines the statistic derived from the slave population database. Why these patterns emerge is explored later in the chapter. Further analysis of Table 3.4 shows that while in 1811/22 the females aged 45 and over accounted for 45 per cent of the manumitted females, in 1822/25 that percentage was reduced to just over 20 per cent. Manumitted females, in the 15-44 age range, increased from 36 per cent in 1818/22 to 40 per cent in 1822/25. There was also an increase in the percentage of females under the age of 14 who were manumitted in 1822/25 when compared to those manumitted in 1818/22. In 1825/28 and 1828/31, the percentage of males manumitted was higher than the females (Table 3.3). Further analysis, using Table 3.4, shows that in both years more than half of the males manumitted were in the prime working group, ages 15-44. The age group represented the individuals who, because of strength, were in a better position to engage in the additional work, whether fishing, keeping animals or cutting fire wood for the market in Tortola or St Thomas. The period with the highest percentage of females manumitted relative to males was in 1831/34, when 73 per cent of the slaves manumitted were females as opposed to 27 per cent who were males (Table 3.3).

**Table 3.3** Manumission totals and Percentages

Year	Tortola				The Cays			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1818/22	24	37	40	63	15	41	22	63
1822/25	19	56	15	44	20	38	33	44
1825/28	27	46	32	54	28	55	23	45
1828/31	13	45	16	55	24	62	15	35
1831/34	19	44	24	56	7	27	19	76

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

In this particular case (1831/34), the majority of the females were below the age of 44 with only 5 per cent being over the age of 45. The manumitted female slaves in the age group 15-44 accounted for about 42 per cent of the female slaves manumitted on the Cays, and the girls age 14 and under made up over 50 per cent of the number. In particular, it should be observed that 1831/34 was the only time that manumitted girls in the age group 10-14 outnumbered other female children in the age groups 0-4 and 5-9. Further, it should also be noted that throughout the years while slave registration was in progress, the percentage of children, male and female, under the age of 14 was generally equal, except in the final year of slavery when only 4 per cent of the children were male compared to 38 per cent who were female (Table 3.4).

**Table 3.4** Percentage of Manumissions on the Cays by Gender groups 1822-1834

Age	1818/22		1822/25		1825/28		1828/31		1831/34	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>0-4</b>	13.3	0.0	20.0	3.0	10.7	13.0	8.3	13.3	14.3	15.8
<b>5-9</b>	6.7	18.2	10.0	18.2	10.7	17.4	4.2	13.3	0.0	15.8
<b>10-14</b>	6.7	0.0	0.0	18.2	3.6	0.0	8.3	6.7	0.0	21.1
<b>15-19</b>	6.7	0.0	10.0	6.1	3.6	8.7	4.2	13.3	28.6	15.8
<b>20-24</b>	0.0	4.5	5.0	9.1	10.7	0.0	20.8	6.7	0.0	10.5
<b>25-29</b>	13.3	9.1	10.0	6.1	7.1	8.7	25.0	13.3	14.3	0.0
<b>30-34</b>	6.7	13.6	15.0	6.1	21.4	4.3	4.2	0.0	42.9	5.3
<b>35-39</b>	20.0	4.5	10.0	12.1	10.7	4.3	4.2	0.0	0.0	5.3
<b>40-44</b>	6.7	4.5	0.0	0.0	10.7	4.3	0.0	20.0	0.0	5.3
<b>45-49</b>	13.3	9.1	0.0	9.1	3.6	17.4	4.2	0.0	0.0	5.3
<b>50-54</b>	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	3.6	4.3	8.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>55-59</b>	0.0	0.0	10.0	3.0	0.0	4.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>60-64</b>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>65-69</b>	0.0	13.6	5.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>70-74</b>	6.7	9.1	5.0	6.1	3.6	0.0	8.3	6.7	0.0	0.0
<b>75+</b>	0.0	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.7	0.0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

There was indeed a steady decline in the percentage of slaves over the age of 45 who were manumitted on the Cays. In 1818/22, 35 per cent of the slaves manumitted on the

Cays were over the age of 45 years, but in subsequent years the percentage fell to just over 20 per cent and finally reached a low of 4 per cent in 1834.<sup>33</sup>

In 1819, four elderly female slaves, Lucy, Hannah, Melia and Agnes ages 68-89, who lived on the island of Spanish Town – one of the Cays – were manumitted by the heirs of John Rymer. The Manumission of these slaves coincided with the sale of all the slaves on the Rymer Estate (178 in total), to George Martin, a sugar plantation owner on Tortola. Considering the age of the women, it would be easy to conclude that their manumission might be based on the fact that they were not saleable, but among the slaves on the Rymer Estate there were eight other slaves, four males and four females, over the age of 60 who were sold. Hence, it would seem that there might have been other considerations behind the decision to manumit those women, but unfortunately the record is silent on the matter. One thing, however, is certain. Being elderly, these individuals might not have been in a position to benefit greatly from the freedom granted to them as they might not have had the strength to work and support themselves. Their owner on the other hand would have been relieved of any responsibility of caring for them.<sup>34</sup>

Table 3.3 shows that with the exception of 1822/25, on Tortola there was always a higher percentage of female slaves manumitted than male slaves. This finding seems to be in keeping with the gender ratio on the island, as in the general population females outnumbered males. In 1822/25, however, 56 per cent of the slaves manumitted on the island were males with the remaining 44 per cent being females. Here a shift in the proportion could be a direct result of the disruption posed by the large number of relocations that occurred in the colony. The official view that families were not

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<sup>33</sup> T71/371 Virgin Islands Slave Register, 1822.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

disrupted in most cases related to women and their children. This situation forced enslaved men like Jeffery Pickering on the Josiah Bay estate to seek manumission to enable them to be with their families (details on this case were outlined earlier).

Table 3.5 reveals that 37 per cent of those males who were manumitted were in the most productive age group, 15-44. The remainder of the males who were manumitted were equally divided between the children (aged 0-14) and the older slaves (age 45 and over). Some of the older slaves who were manumitted were even over the age of 70 years.

**Table 3.5** Percentage of Manumissions on Tortola by Gender Group 1818-1834

	1818/22		1822/25		1825/28		1828/31		1831/34	
Age	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
0-4	0.0	0.0	15.8	26.7	22.2	3.1	15.4	6.3	15.8	16.7
5-9	33.3	12.5	0.0	13.3	22.2	18.8	7.7	6.3	15.8	8.3
10-14	20.8	5.0	15.8	6.7	14.8	6.3	7.7	6.3	10.5	8.3
15-19	12.5	5.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.5	5.3	0.0
20-24	0.0	17.5	5.3	0.0	3.7	6.3	15.4	0.0	0.0	8.3
25-29	4.2	7.5	5.3	0.0	3.7	3.1	0.0	12.5	15.8	4.2
30-34	0.0	17.5	15.8	6.7	7.4	18.8	7.7	12.5	5.3	16.7
35-39	4.2	5.0	10.5	13.3	11.1	9.4	15.4	6.3	15.8	12.5
40-44	0.0	7.5	0.0	20.0	0.0	9.4	15.4	6.3	0.0	4.2
45-49	4.2	7.5	5.3	6.7	3.7	6.3	0.0	6.3	5.3	8.3
50-54	8.3	7.5	10.5	0.0	3.7	6.3	7.7	18.8	10.5	4.2
55-59	0.0	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
60-64	4.2	2.5	5.3	0.0	7.4	0.0	0.0	6.3	0.0	8.3
65-69	4.2	0.0	10.5	0.0	0.0	3.1	7.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
70+	4.2	2.5	0.0	6.7	0.0	6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

The period with the largest percentage of female slaves manumitted on Tortola was 1818/22. In that year, 63 per cent of the slaves manumitted were females and they were almost evenly distributed in the active work group (age 15-44) and the old slaves (aged 45 and over). Female slaves under the age of 14 only accounted for about 18 per cent of the total number of female slaves manumitted on Tortola in 1818/22 (Tables 3.3 & 3.5).



In the period 1825/28, to 1831/34, the percentage of female slaves in the active work group (age 15-44) who were manumitted comprised almost half of the females manumitted. Many reasons have been given to support this finding but the one that has been considered the most important is the idea that “free women were far more dependable than free men.” Freeing female slaves did not mean losing their services, as in some cases they continued to work for their former masters or other slave owners as wage earners.<sup>35</sup>

In 1818/22, however, close to half of all the slaves manumitted were over the age of 45, but in subsequent years that number fell to about 20 per cent fluctuating to a point or two above or below that mark. Children aged 14 and under, on the other hand, only represented 9 per cent of the manumitted slaves in 1818/22, but in 1822/25 and 1825/28 that amount increased to 39 per cent and 42 per cent respectively. These increases were not prolonged: the percentage of manumitted slaves who were children, fell to 24 per cent of the total number of slaves manumitted in 1828/31 before rising again to 34 per cent in 1833/34. One of the possible reasons for the reduction in manumissions is that in the last registration period, in particular, there were definite discussions about full emancipation and the range and levels of compensation that would be given to slave owners for their slaves. From the point of view of the slaves, if freedom was imminent, there was no need for them to try to influence the master to give them manumission. In some cases where slaves might have accumulated money for the purpose of buying their own freedom, they might have thought that such money could be better used to maintain themselves after full emancipation was granted.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 264.

<sup>36</sup> T71/370-75 Virgin Slave Registers, 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831, & 1834.

These findings show that female slaves had a slightly higher chance of manumission when compared to male slaves in the Virgin Islands' slave society. This was also the same situation in other slave societies, and seemed to stem from the fact that females had a better chance at manumission because of the level of relationships they were able to develop through their work. In some instances, women also gained freedom through relatives and friends who were themselves free. This issue will be discussed further when we look at the types of relationships that facilitated manumissions. Bernard Moitt, in researching how women in the French Caribbean were able to access the system available to them to change their status from slave to free, found that they not only had an advantage over men, but that they were ingenious and relentless in their pursuit of freedom.<sup>37</sup> While the slaves in the Virgin Islands did not have the same system and laws to encourage manumission through self-purchase as in the French Caribbean, there is no doubt that the female as well as male slaves possessed the same characteristics and strong desire for freedom. When age is taken into consideration, it is observed that the majority of slaves manumitted in the Virgin Islands were in the active years or were children. However, we cannot overlook the fact that slave owners were consistently manumitting elderly slaves, even though in small numbers, throughout all the registration periods with the exception of the period 1831/1834.

### **Manumissions by Colour of skin**

One of the factors found to have impacted manumission rates in the British Caribbean was skin colour. Orlando Patterson was of the view that the existence of proportionately high numbers of coloured persons in the free population was because white slave masters were more willing to manumit slaves that were closer to their colour. One thing however was certain, this category of slaves who were of mixed race, the offspring of

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<sup>37</sup> Bernard Moitt, "Freedom from Bondage at a Price: Women and Redemption for Slavery in the French Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century," *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 26, No. 2 (2005), 247-256.

white men and black women, were generally treated differently from slaves who were black. In Jamaica, it was found that some slave masters were keen to manumit and in addition bequeath their estates to their illegitimate children, who were born as a result of their sexual exploits with some of their female slaves. In an attempt to reduce the amount of wealth that was being passed on to these coloured people, several laws were passed imposing limits. Those coloured slaves who were not manumitted continued in slavery, but were generally tasked as domestics or skilled tradesmen - work assignments which brought them into closer contact with white elites than regular field slaves - thereby increasing their chances of being manumitted.<sup>38</sup>

Statistics have revealed that in the Virgin Islands about 8 per cent of the slave population was described as coloured and it would be interesting to see what proportion of them were manumitted. The two periods with the highest number of manumissions, 1818/22 and 1825/28, will be examined in detail in an attempt to gain an understanding of the experience of the coloured slaves in relation to black slaves in the Virgin Islands.

Table 3.6 reveals that in 1818/22, 55 per cent of the slaves manumitted on Tortola were listed as 'coloureds.' While 60 per cent of the coloured female slaves who were manumitted fell in the age group 15-44, males in the same group accounted for close to 20 per cent. On the other hand, while there were no coloured female slaves under the age of 14 who were manumitted, over 27 per cent of coloured males fell in that category. Children of colour made up about 26 per cent of the total number of slaves manumitted on Tortola in 1818/22 as opposed to the black children who only accounted for 5 per cent of the total. On the Cays, as was observed on Tortola, black children only made up five per cent of the manumissions, 15 per cent of all slaves manumitted were

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<sup>38</sup> Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 254; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 230-231, 268-269.

coloured children. In both instances, on Tortola as well as on the Cays, male coloured children had a higher percentage of manumission than female coloured children (Table 3.6).

**Table 3.6** Percentage of Manumission by Colour 1818/22.

Age	Tortola				The Cays			
	Black		Coloured		Black		Coloured	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>0-4</b>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>5-9</b>	18.2	0.0	46.2	22.7	0.0	12.5	8.0	33.3
<b>10-14</b>	9.1	0.0	30.8	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>15-19</b>	9.1	5.6	15.4	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>20-24</b>	0.0	5.6	0.0	27.3	0.0	6.3	4.0	0.0
<b>25-29</b>	0.0	5.6	7.7	9.1	22.2	12.5	16.0	0.0
<b>30-34</b>	0.0	27.8	0.0	9.1	11.1	0.0	4.0	50.0
<b>35-39</b>	9.1	5.6	0.0	4.5	33.3	6.3	16.0	0.0
<b>40-44</b>	0.0	11.1	0.0	4.5	0.0	6.3	4.0	0.0
<b>45-49</b>	9.1	11.1	0.0	4.5	22.2	12.5	16.0	0.0
<b>50-54</b>	18.2	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.5	8.0	0.0
<b>55-59</b>	0.0	5.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>60-64</b>	9.1	5.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>65-69</b>	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.5	8.0	16.7
<b>70+</b>	9.1	0.0	0.0	4.5	11.1	18.8	16.0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

When we look at the frequency of manumissions on the Cays and on Tortola for 1818/22 and 1825/28, we will discover that the total number of manumissions on the Cays was 37 and 51 respectively, while on Tortola the figures stood at 64 and 59 respectively. With these numbers in mind, it would be useful to determine how many of those were coloureds as opposed to how many were black. Firstly, the percentage of coloured slaves manumitted on the Cays as well as on Tortola in 1825/28, represented a reduction based on the figures for 1818/22. Additionally, unlike in 1818/22, in 1825/28

the majority of the coloured slaves manumitted on the Cays, as well as on Tortola were children age 14 and under. Further, on Tortola male coloured children were the dominant group, whereas on the Cays, females outnumbered males more than 2:1. There were very few adults of colour who were manumitted in 1825/28. On the island of Tortola they were all females while on the Cays they were males. Lastly, we cannot overlook the fact that while no males over the age of 14 years were manumitted on Tortola, on the Cays no coloured females were manumitted over the age of 14 (Tables 3.6 & 3.7).

These findings reveal that coloured slaves in the Virgin Islands had a greater advantage with regards to manumissions than coloured slaves in other slave societies. Considering that coloured slaves only made up about 8 per cent of the slave population in the Virgin Islands, they consistently comprised a proportionately high number of the colony's slave manumissions. In 1818/22, coloured slaves accounted for 37 per cent of the manumissions in the Virgin Islands and in 1825/28, the figure rose to a high of 46 per cent. When children are taken into consideration, an even higher proportion of coloured children than black children were manumitted. In Barbados, it was found that coloured slaves were manumitted at a higher rate when compared with their relative numbers in the slave population. For example, in 1831, while coloured slaves were 14 per cent of the population, they accounted for 63 per cent of the total manumissions.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Handler and Pohlmann, "Slave Manumission and Freedmen in Seventeenth - Century Barbados" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 41, No.3, (1984), 401.

**Table 3.7** Percentage of Manumissions by Skin Colour, 1828.

Age	Tortola				The Cays			
	Black		Colour		Black		Colour	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
0-4	12.5	4.0	36.4	0.0	8.3	5.6	25.0	40.0
5-9	18.8	20.0	27.3	14.3	12.5	5.6	0.0	60.0
10-14	0.0	4.0	36.4	14.3	0.0	0.0	25.0	0.0
15-19	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.1	25.0	0.0
20-24	6.3	0.0	0.0	28.6	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
25-29	6.3	4.0	0.0	0.0	8.3	11.1	0.0	0.0
30-34	12.5	20.0	0.0	14.3	20.8	5.6	25.0	0.0
35-39	18.8	8.0	0.0	14.3	12.5	5.6	0.0	0.0
40-44	0.0	8.0	0.0	14.3	12.5	5.6	0.0	0.0
45-49	6.3	8.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	22.2	0.0	0.0
50-54	6.3	8.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	5.6	0.0	0.0
55-59	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.6	0.0	0.0
60-64	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
65-69	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
70-74	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
75+	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

**Relationships that led to manumissions**

Manumission, as a process through which slaves were able to change their status in the community from bondsmen to freedmen was based on a firm legal premise supported by over two hundred years of practice. The greatest impact that the practice of manumission had on the slave societies in the British Caribbean, however, was not on the legal structures of slavery but on its social components. As was alluded to earlier, the levels and rates of manumissions in any slave society give an indication of the extent to which slave owners and indeed the ruling elite, interacted with and saw slaves as humans; individuals capable of thought and actions. Hence, we cannot overlook the fact that above all else, manumission was a social process which was built upon and sustained by the relationships that existed before hand, not only between the slave and

his master but also between the slave and other free persons. It was these relationships, in whatever form they existed, that preceded and at times facilitated the legal process of manumission.<sup>40</sup>

For the purpose of this discussion, four types of relationships have been identified: relationships with owners, sexual relationships, family relationships, and relationships with friends. Each of these areas will be looked at in relation to the manumission experiences of slaves in the Virgin Islands during the final decades of slavery, 1818-1834.

Generally, the evidence relating to manumissions in slave societies clearly shows that many of the slaves manumitted were freed because of the special relationship which they had developed with their masters. In wills and deeds, in particular, slave masters rewarded their slaves with manumission because of their loyalty and diligence in their work. Some slave masters even went on to state that their decision to manumit certain slaves was motivated by love and affection for the slaves concerned. While we can never be sure of the exact feelings the slaves had for their masters, it might not be farfetched to assume that the slaves, through their actions and demeanour towards their masters, helped to cultivate and maintain these relationships.<sup>41</sup>

During the period 1825/28, more than three quarters of the gratuitous manumissions granted by slave owners in the Virgin Islands was to reward slaves, mainly for their faithful service, among other things. One example of such a manumission was when

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<sup>40</sup> Jerome Handler and Arnold Sio "Barbados" in *Neither Slave Nor Free The Free Man of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*, ed. David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1972), 224 – 225;

Rosemary Brana-Shute, Approaching Freedom: "The Manumission of Slaves in Suriname, 1760-1828," *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (December 1989), 40-63.

<sup>41</sup> Edward L. Cox, *Free Coloreds in the Slave Societies of St. Kitts and Grenada, 1763-1833*, (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press 1984), 38-41; Sidney Chalhoub, "Slaves, Freedmen and the Politics of Freedom in Brazil: The Experience of Blacks in the City of Rio" *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1989), 65-84.

Harriet, a 49 year old female and her eight children, ages 9-23, who lived on Guana Island were set free by Rachael Smith. While Smith acknowledged the faithful and loyal service of Harriet, a minimal sum of five shillings was received in consideration of the children's freedom. This action on the part of Smith and the involvement of Harriet on behalf of her children shows clearly that both women had the interest of the children, some of whom were adults, at heart. On the other hand, love and affection prompted Elizabeth Sewer, a slave owner on the island of Jost Van Dyke, to manumit Cottine a 38 year old female and her four children, three girls and one boy, ages 8-16. Moreover, such relationships were not limited to female slaves but also involved male slaves who similarly, though maybe in different capacities, performed faithful service to their owners. Such was the case of James Hatchett, a 29 year old man on Jost Van Dyke, who was rewarded with his freedom in 1825/28, by his owner Joseph Hatchet, who considered him to be faithful and loyal.<sup>42</sup>

One of the reasons why female slaves were identified as having an advantage over male slaves, with regards to manumissions, was because of the opportunity they had to develop sexual relationships with free men, white and coloured, who were able to pay the redemption price for their freedom. In some cases, when those women bore children for their partners, the father of the children purchased the freedom of both the woman and her children.<sup>43</sup> This was exactly what was done by Michael Fraser, a white male who acted as attorney and manager of several estates on Tortola. In a deed executed on March 23, 1828, Fraser manumitted 35 year old Betsey and her two sons William and Ebenezer, who were both six years of age. The records show that sometime earlier that

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<sup>42</sup> T71/374 Virgin Islands Slave Register, 1828; CO239/22 Slave Returns 1825 -1828.

<sup>43</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 234 – 264; Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1965), 217.



same year Fraser had purchased Betsey and the two boys, whom he acknowledged as his sons, from their previous owner.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, during the period 1818/22, Mary a 28 year old seamstress on Tortola along with her two children, John aged 6 and Maria aged 5, were purchased from their owner and manumitted by William Johnston, a white mariner, who was also the children's father. Thereafter, Mary and the children lived with Johnston and she kept his house. Yet another example involved Jenny, a 32 year old female, who had three children for William Nibbs, a free man of colour, who was a carpenter. In order to secure the freedom of his children and their mother, Nibbs used James Roberts as an intermediary and had him purchase Jenny and the children from Mrs McNamara, who was their owner at the time, and set them free.<sup>45</sup>

One of the characteristics of a slave society that contributed to high rates of manumission was the extent to which there was an already proportionately large population of freedmen in particular colonies. As individuals attained their personal freedom they did not turn their backs on their friends and family who were still enslaved. This means that as these individuals were able to accumulate the necessary amounts of money, they systematically purchased the freedom of members of their family and entered into agreements to secure the release of friends.<sup>46</sup>

One of the most striking examples found in the Virgin Islands of freedmen buying the freedom of their relatives involved Bethiah Barry, an enslaved woman on one of the Cays in the Virgin Islands, who was manumitted in 1817 by her master John P. Vanterpool. Five years later, in 1822, Bethiah returned to her former master and paid

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<sup>44</sup> PP1825 (115)II Slave Trade, No.2 Mr. Dougan's Report, Appendix F, 1815

<sup>45</sup> CO239/22 Slave Returns 1825-1828; PP1825(115)II Slave Trade No. 2 Mr. Dougan' Report.

<sup>46</sup> Beckles, "Freedom Without Liberty", 205; Cox, *Free Coloreds*, 39-40.

the price for manumission for her 63 year old mother, Boice. Again, after another five years in 1827, Bethiah also purchased the freedom of two young men, John and William ages 25 and 21 from Vanterpool, her former owner. While the record does not indicate the relationship that existed between Bethiah and the young men, it was possible that they were either her children or her siblings.<sup>47</sup> Another example that closely resembles Bethiah's involves a man, Quashy Stevens, who was among 13 slaves manumitted by Sarah Stevens in 1825. At the time of the manumission, Quashy was 35 years old and five years later, in 1830 he purchased the freedom of his two children, Present age 7 and Rachael age 2.<sup>48</sup>

The manumission records show the extent to which freedmen valued their family relationships and the lengths to which they went in order to have them released from bondage. There is no question that this was the motive of Lewie Hyndman, a free man of colour, when he secured the freedom of his granddaughter Eliza, who was a slave on the Carrot Bay estate in 1828. This child, who was 14 years of age, was the only person on the estate to be manumitted during the period 1818-1834, which suggests that the owner of the estate was unwilling to part with any of his slaves. Therefore it is not surprising to discover that in order to secure Eliza's freedom, Hyman had to offer in exchange one of his slaves, John aged 13. In spite of her young age, Eliza was considered a valuable asset on the estate as her job was to teach the younger children. Eliza's manumission meant that the children on the estate had to walk several miles to attend a school run by the Methodist missionaries. Hyman's actions imply that he had no ideological opposition to slavery but wanted his family to be free, even if it meant the continued enslavement of someone else.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Virgin Islands Archives Index to Deed Book; PP1825 (115) II Slave Trade No. 2 Thomas Dougan's Report.

<sup>48</sup> Virgin Islands Archives Index to Deed Book 1792 -1839: PP1825 (115)II Slave Trade No.2 Mr. Dougan's Report.

<sup>49</sup> T71/371 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1818-1834; CO239/22 Slave returns 1825-1828.

In addition to family ties, slaves also developed general friendships through which they were able to get assistance in obtaining their manumission. Some of these transactions were executed on a contractual basis where friends were involved in assisting with securing the manumission of some slaves<sup>50</sup>. Where this happened, the manumitted slave would then pay back his benefactor over a period of time. Jim, a 29 year old man, found such a benefactor in Martha Frett, a white female slave owner on Tortola. Jim, who originally lived on the island of Spanish Town was sold as part of the stock of slaves belonging to John Rymer and taken to the Brewers Bay estate on Tortola in 1819. In 1822, Jim entered into an agreement with Martha Frett who advanced the money to pay for his freedom, allowing Jim to relocate to Peter Island where he planted cotton and was engaged in fishing. Within a short period of time it was reported that Jim had almost completed the payments to Frett. Another slave who had the same background and experience as Jim, was 49 years old Ben Markoe. He found a benefactor in a white male slave owner, Richard King, who advanced the money to purchase his freedom. Ben, who was a shipwright and had his own vessel, was eventually able to repay King.<sup>51</sup>

Before concluding this discussion on the type of relationships that led to the manumission of slaves, I will return to the issue of relationships that slaves developed with their masters. On the Martin Estate on Tortola, 27 slaves, 4.2 per cent of the total number of slaves (639) on the estate, were manumitted by the last will and testament of George Martin the owner of the estate. The will, which was dated 31<sup>st</sup> July 1816 and executed in 1819 following the death of Martin, gave in some instances clear indications of the type of relationships that existed between Martin and the slaves he manumitted. Three female mulatto slaves (Boice aged 29, Jenny aged 39 and Nancy aged 29) had a total of ten children for Martin. These women along with their children

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<sup>50</sup> Cox, *Free Coloreds*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> PP 1825 (115) II Slave Trade, No. 2 Mr. Dougan's Report.

were all manumitted. Sally, a black slave who was about the age of 42 years, had five children for Martin, all of whom along with her were also manumitted. Two slaves, Hannah aged 21 and Robert age 6 who were recognised as Martin's natural children, were also freed but no mention was made of their mothers. There were also children manumitted who were not identified as Martin's children; these included Thomas aged six and Joe aged nine. Thomas, who was described as yellow in colour, was the son of a slave woman Liah, who was the nurse on the estate. In addition to the women already identified, who were manumitted because of their direct sexual relationship with Martin, there were five other women (Betsey aged 26, Fanny Smith aged 44, Phibba Gordon aged 44, Big Margaret aged 34 and Rachael Hyman aged 59) who were also manumitted. While we cannot be certain of the exact type of relationship that existed between Martin and these women, their interaction with him seemingly resulted in their manumission.<sup>52</sup>

The only men on the Martin estates who benefitted from manumission by Martin's will were George aged 16, Daniel aged 19 and Richard aged 27. Like the women just mentioned, there is no specific information in the will to indicate the exact relationship those men had with Martin, but he showed concern for their wellbeing directing that they be trained as carpenters. With this profession the men would have a good position to work and care for themselves. This same level of care and concern was also extended to all of the slaves who were manumitted by Martin, as he provided for them in one way or another. Abraham, the son of Boice, was the heir to the Martin's estate which comprised 639 slaves. Provisions were made for the education and maintenance of all the children and several of the women were given slaves as their personal property.

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<sup>52</sup> CO239/11 Petition: Martin to The Earl Bathurst August 1, 1824.

More importantly, all of the manumitted slaves were given access to property on one of Martin's estates.<sup>53</sup>

The final twist to this extraordinary example of relationships that led to the manumission of slaves came after the execution of Martin's will, and centres around three of the women who were manumitted with their children. The women involved petitioned the court for freedom to be granted to three children all age 4, who were not mentioned in Martin's will. While we do not have the benefit of the court records, we can speculate that since Martin wrote his will in 1816 and died in 1818 it is possible that he did not have a chance to update it to include the youngest of his children. Hence, the children were duly manumitted by the court in the Virgin Islands. Thus we see that even after Martin's death, these women were so empowered through the relationship they had developed with him that they used the legal structures of the colony to obtain what they no doubt believed would have been his wish.

While the slave laws in the Virgin Islands did not speak to the issue of manumissions, the actions of the Martin women were clearly supported by the legal precedence that was set by Chief Justice James Robertson, who with the support of his colleagues on the bench, established a process by which persons who considered themselves free could apply to the court to confirm such a status. Robertson, whose tenure as Chief Justice in the Virgin Islands lasted from 1784 until 1817, ruled that an enslaved woman who claimed she was free and being held against her will could have a court appointed patron or guardian prosecute a suit in *the* court of Common Pleas on her behalf. While the law did not give slaves a voice in the courts, Robertson, recognising them as humans

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

with rights, used the provision under the law that required free blacks to have an assigned patron who annually vouched for their good conduct within the society.<sup>54</sup>

## **Summary**

The statistics revealed that unlike other slave societies in the British Caribbean where manumission was considered an urban phenomenon, in the Virgin Islands the smaller slave population on the Cays accounted for the greater proportion of manumissions in the colony. Interestingly, the Cays were hardest hit economically, which was in the slaves' favour as their redemption costs were within their financial reach. The level and rate of manumissions in the Virgin Islands slave society gave an indication of the extent to which slave owners in the colony interacted with their slaves and eventually saw them as human beings, capable of thought and actions. Hence, we cannot escape the fact that above all else manumission was a social process which was built upon and sustained by the relationships that existed before hand, not only between the slave and his master but also between the enslaved and other free persons in the slave society. It was these relationships, in whatever form they existed, that preceded and at times facilitated the legal process of manumission within the Virgin Islands during the final decades of slavery. As only a small number of individuals in the colony were granted freedom through manumissions, the majority of the enslaved struggled to develop levels of autonomy to make their lives meaningful. In the following chapter, we will explore how the enslaved in the Virgin Islands who did not benefit from manumission were able to develop varying levels of autonomy.

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<sup>54</sup> PP 1826-27 (36) Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Criminal Justice in the West Indies (1826),92; C.O. 239/3 Listing of Public Functionaries in the Virgin Islands, 5 May 1817.

## Chapter 4

### Resistance

This chapter explores the extent to which the slaves in the Virgin Islands resisted their enslavement in an attempt to ensure their survival and attain varying levels of freedom. It examines the incidents of running away and looks at how the enslaved used that activity as a negotiating tool in an attempt to secure their legal freedom. The chapter also explores the wider issue of day-to-day resistance and how the slaves were able to adapt to certain aspects of their enslavement to survive and improve their autonomy. Lastly, the slaves' attempt at collective resistance through a failed conspiracy will be reviewed in order to determine its cause, why it failed and the response of the white community.

One of the most unifying features of slave societies in the British Caribbean was the extent to which the enslaved resisted their enslavement in an attempt to attain levels of autonomy in their lives. Regardless of the size of the individual slave societies, their geographic location in relation to other slave societies, their economic focus, or their demographic composition, there was always evidence among the enslaved population of a 'culture of resistance,' which proved to be widespread, encompassing every aspect of the life. This resistance, which manifested itself in violent and non-violent forms, was considered to be 'endemic to slave societies' in the Caribbean and was based on the slaves' desire to take control of their own existence and thereby becoming free.<sup>1</sup>

Slavery in the Americas was described by Alvin O. Thompson as 'one of the most extreme forms of power relationships' in which the enslaver controlled every aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary McD. Beckles, *Natural Rebels A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 152; Michael Craton, "Forms of Resistance to Slavery," in *General History of the Caribbean: Vol. III The slave societies of the Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W. Knight (London: UNESCO Publishing, 1997), 222.

the lives of the enslaved. This level of power was so extensive that it was used to recreate the enslaved in the image of the enslaver, totally stripping them of their humanity and rendering him or her totally dependent on others. Extreme violence, aggression and coercion were common place as the overlords maintained their grip on the lives of the enslaved, mercilessly reminding them of their subservient status. The enslaved on the other hand, driven by their inner passion for freedom, in different ways continually resisted the efforts of their enslavers in an attempt to ‘assert their rights as human beings.’<sup>2</sup>

One Caribbean historian, Hilary McD. Beckles, in reviewing the issue of slave resistance – in all its forms – in the region, concluded that there was evidence of political consciousness among the enslaved population. This consciousness led to the development of a political culture of resistance, the philosophy of which was deeply rooted in issues of survival. Hence, the enslaved had to weigh carefully the consequences of their actions, not only for themselves but also for their children and the wider community. Hard choices had to be made. In fighting against the system through open revolt, they knew that the response of the white planters supported by the Colonial government would be brutal and deadly, leading to them sacrificing their lives. On the other hand, if the enslaved made compromises, gained concessions and at the same time undermined the system from within, they could develop varying levels of autonomy and enhance their chances for survival.<sup>3</sup>

In Beckles’ view, what we now describe as slave resistance can be seen as the “black anti-slavery movement” in the Caribbean and can be categorised into three stages; 1500-

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<sup>2</sup> Alvin O. Thompson, *The Flight to Freedom: African runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press 2006), 21, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary McD. Beckles, “Caribbean Anti-Slavery: The Self- Liberation Ethos of the Enslaved Blacks” in *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy: A student reader*, ed. Hilary McD. Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers Ltd.) p 363-344



1750, covering the early phase of the plantation era; 1750-1800, the more established period of the plantation society and 1804-1838 the period when the plantations were going through crisis.

Each of the periods outlined provided different opportunities which were seized by the enslaved to further their collective agendas within a system from which they could not escape. This struggle for autonomy was seen as manifesting itself at three levels; day-to-day resistance; unsuccessful plots and revolts, and lastly, successful rebellions.<sup>4</sup>

All of these actions, when taken together, speak to what Eric Williams referred to as a “dynamic and social force” on the part of the enslaved, indicating their desire for freedom and ultimately influencing the decision of general emancipation. In Williams’ opinion, the alternative for the British was clear, “emancipation from above, or emancipation from below.”<sup>5</sup> Michael Craton in testing Williams’ conclusions found that indeed “slave resistance and emancipation were closely intertwined” during the final phase of British slavery in the Caribbean. The continuous display of discontent on the part of the enslaved – even when the planters tried feverishly to assure the British government that the slaves were content – contributed to the metropolitan view that the situation was untenable and an exit strategy was needed.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, it was determined that the rate and scale of resistance was dynamic, in that it closely reflected the rate and scale of changes within the plantation system, especially during the final phase of slavery. The enslaved were fully conscious of what was happening around them and even further afield, and took advantage of the situation in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 363.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 204.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Craton, “Emancipation from below? The Role of the British West Indian Slave in the Emancipation Movement,” in *Out of Slavery Abolition and After* ed. Jack Hayward (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 124.

an attempt to develop their autonomy. In this regard, Craton concluded that in the Caribbean the enslaved resisted depersonalization, economic submission and acculturation, and in so doing gained certain levels of control within their lives. This ultimately led to the creolization of the slave societies and ensured their survival in the region. Also crucial to the survival of the enslaved was the extent to which they developed a sense of identity as individuals and as a community, which directly or indirectly influenced the range and types of resistance they engaged in.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the success of slave resistance in the Caribbean as a whole and in particular within individual slave societies can be determined by the extent to which the enslaved were able to ‘overcome the constraints of the masters’ system.’<sup>8</sup> In the Virgin Islands, as the economy declined and the internal dynamics of the colony changed, the planters’ Legislature went to great lengths to portray slavery in the colony as an institution where coercive measures towards the slaves were replaced by actions that were governed by ‘feelings of purest humanity’, a system that was free from all compulsion and based on ‘measures of common consent.’<sup>9</sup> The irony, however, is that the evidence reveals a different reality, indicating that the enslaved, mindful of the turbulence within the system, continued their acts of defiance. The enslaved were engaged in measures of passive resistance, while at the same time adjusting their lives as they made accommodation for the demands of the system when it suited their purpose. Lastly, the enslaved engaged in open acts of defiance and participated in a major conspiracy designed to take their freedom by force.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Craton, “Forms of Resistance to Slavery,” in *General History of the Caribbean Vol. III The Slave society of the Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W. Knight (UNESCO Publishing, 1997), 234.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223.

<sup>9</sup> C.O.239/26 Report of the Joint Committee of the Board of Council and House of Assembly, 23 December 1830.

## Running Away

The Virgin Islands Slave Database constructed using information from the Virgin Islands' slave registers for the period 1818-1834, provides a unique opportunity to not only identify the enslaved individuals who were reported as runaways, but to also examine the circumstances which prevailed in the colony that prompted this form of response to enslavement. Such an analysis will reveal deeper insights into the Virgin Islands' slave society in particular, and slavery in the region as a whole.

The act of running away was considered one of the most common and frequent forms of resistance exhibited by the enslaved in the Caribbean throughout the time of slavery. In running away, enslaved persons in the region protested, albeit peacefully, against their enslavement. The act of running away, in the eyes of their masters, however, was a gross act of insubordination. Every successful escape was regarded not only as a serious breach in security, but also an erosion of the system of discipline, which was established to maintain order and control among the enslaved. Thus slave masters regarded these acts of desertion as great inconveniences, even though they did not in any way disrupt the social stability of slave society. What the runaways did, however, was to deny their masters their labour, signalling to others who remained behind that they too possessed the power to negatively impact economic operations.<sup>10</sup>

There is no question that all enslaved persons craved freedom above all other things, but what remained open to individual interpretation was how that desire was acted upon. Thus, for a small minority of the enslaved population in the Caribbean, the desire to be masters of their own destiny motivated them to run away from their masters, a response

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<sup>10</sup> Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Caribbean at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1965), 257; Gad Heuman, "Runaway Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Barbados" in *The Slavery Reader* ed. Gad Heuman and James Walvin (London: Routledge, 2003), 594, 600; Bernard A. Marshall, "Marronage In Slave Plantation Society: A Case Study of Dominica, 1785-1815" *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 54, No. 3 (2008), 103; Craton, "Forms of Resistance," 230.

that was universal in nature as it related to all persons who exist in a state of slavery. The constraints and conditions of slavery in the region invariably proved too difficult for some of the enslaved, as they existed in fear under a brutal system in which every means was used to keep them in subjection. To the enslaved, running away in spite of the risks – harsh punishment if caught and at times insurmountable natural obstacles – provided ‘an opportunity to live with a certain measure of dignity’ thereby enhancing their sense of identity and self-worth as human beings. Such an existence rewarded those who were successful with a life free from the indignities which characterized slavery in the region – hunger, over-work and unjust punishment – and allowed them to experience some of the liberties that were natural to all men: the freedom to associate with whomever they wanted, and to raise and maintain a family.<sup>11</sup>

One Caribbean historian, in looking at the issue of slave resistance in the region during the nineteenth century, estimated that about ten per cent of all the slaves in the region ran away from their masters at some time during their enslavement. Furthermore, it was also found that about two per cent of the enslaved population was absent at any one time. These absences, however, fell into different categories as some were of a short term nature, from a few days to a few weeks, with the individuals involved seeking redress for specific grievances or at times simply going away to visit friends or family. On the other hand, there were also those enslaved individuals who ran away for longer periods with no intention of ever returning.<sup>12</sup>

In the Virgin Islands, as in other colonies in the British Caribbean, enslaved persons resisted their enslavement and ran away from their masters. This action occurred from

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<sup>11</sup>Barry W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica 1807-1834* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1995), 181; Anthony McFarlane, “Cimarrones and Palenques: Runaways and Resistance in Colonial Colombia” in *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World* ed. Heuman (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 135-136; Thompson *The Flight to Freedom*, 40, 50-51;

<sup>12</sup> Craton, “Forms of Resistance,” 230-231.

the earliest days of the establishment of slavery in the colony and was far more pronounced in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Thomas Woolrich, a Quaker merchant who lived in the Virgin Islands during the period 1753-1773, testified before a select committee of the House of Commons that it was a common practice for slaves in the Virgin Islands to run away from their masters on a regular basis. In Woolrich's opinion such a response on the part of the enslaved was a direct result of the severe treatment they received at the hands of slave owners. If caught, the punishment for running away was more severe than the punishment that caused the slaves to abscond in the first instance. This punishment fell into two main categories, retribution for the infringement of the rules and deterrence to ensure no future indiscipline occurred. With regard to retribution, the offending enslaved person was given sixty or more lashes on his/her bare back.<sup>13</sup>

Neville Hall, in researching the issues of runaway slaves or grand marronage in the Danish West Indies concluded 'that in small islands where geographical features were hostile to the formation of permanent maroon communities, grand marronage tended to mean maritime marronage.' The Virgin Islands, like its sister islands the Danish West Indies, comprised a group of small islands all in relatively close proximity to each other, just east of the Spanish island of Puerto Rico. The Danish islands – which were in fact part of the Virgin Islands chain of islands – were also located in proximity to the Virgin Islands lying between them and Puerto Rico. As these three locations were all settled by different colonial powers, they created a major opportunity for runaway slaves.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>PP1790 Minutes of a Committee of the House of Commons, Testimony of Thomas Woolrich (26 & 27 March, 1790), 264-292.

<sup>14</sup>N. A. T. Hall, "Maritime Maroons: 'Grand Marronage' from the Danish West Indies" *The William and Mary Quarterly Third Series*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (1985), 482.

The evidence shows that in the early stages of the development of the Danish islands before sugar production encompassed the whole of the islands, the natural forest not only provided a place for slaves to hide but also material to build canoes which were used for escape. However, by the 1730s when the forests were cleared to make way for the expansion of sugar plantations, Puerto Rico became the main escape route for runaways. The Spanish authorities seemingly welcomed deserters with open arms and once the escapees accepted Catholicism, they were permitted to live as free persons in Puerto Rico. For instance, in 1714 a group of about 80 deserters from the Danish and other Caribbean islands were given land by the government in Puerto Rico and allowed to settle there.<sup>15</sup>

Given the similarities that existed between the Danish islands and the Virgin Islands, it is highly probable that the slaves' experience in the early stage of the development of the Virgin Islands was the same as those in the early stages of the development of the Danish islands. This assumption is supported by the fact that by the middle of the eighteenth century the Lieutenant Governor of the Virgin Islands, John Percell, observed that the proximity of the Virgin Islands to the island of Puerto Rico made it relatively easy for the slaves to escape to it. Percell lamented that the problem experienced was further compounded by the authorities in Puerto Rico, who would not comply with any of their requests to return the runaway slaves to their rightful owners.<sup>16</sup>

In the subsequent years, the situation of slaves running away remained unchanged. Such a conclusion is based on the fact that a substantive portion of the colony's slave code, which was enacted February 6, 1783, related to the prevention, apprehension and punishment of runaway slaves. The varying clauses in the law were in direct response

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 476-498.

<sup>16</sup>C.O.152/27 Letter from Deputy Governor, James Percell ,31 January 1752.

to situations that were prevalent within the colony. For example, it was specifically stated that established practices of slaveholders to allow some of their slaves the privilege of hiring themselves out and paying a fixed sum to their master had become a pretext for runaway slaves to seek employment with unsuspecting individuals. The law then attempted to put regulations in place to prevent such abuse of privileges, thus making it easier to detect runaway slaves.<sup>17</sup>

Further, the movement of the slaves outside of their estate was regulated requiring them to have a written pass from someone in authority on their estate. The only time slaves were allowed free movement was to attend the market on Sundays; that activity had to be carried out between sunrise and 8 p.m. Outside of those times, any slave found away from his estate without the necessary pass was liable to be apprehended and be punished with up to twenty lashes.<sup>18</sup>

As was the practice in the British Caribbean, slaves who ran away from their master and absented themselves for up to three consecutive months or up to six months in two years, committed a felony punishable by death. In the Virgin Islands, however, provision was made in the Law for the presiding Justices to use their discretion in applying alternative punishment as they saw fit. Considering that all the officials involved in those proceedings were planters and slaveholders, and given the fact that the government would have had to compensate the slave owner for any slave who was put to death, the alternative provisions might have been particularly useful. The peculiarities of the colony were taken into consideration recognising that there was no way that the

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<sup>17</sup> PP1789 Copies of Several Act for the Regulation of Slaves, Passed in the West Indies, No. 12, Tortola Clause XXIX

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Clause XVIII

practice of running away could have been halted and also bearing in mind that in some cases the absentee individuals returned on their own.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, in addition to the prospect of running away to the island of Puerto Rico, there was also recognition that the slave community developed a very successful system of concealing runaways and clandestinely provided for their upkeep. This level of sympathy towards runaway slaves seemed to have been extended by all segments of the slave society inclusive of slaves, free blacks and even some whites. For example, in early 1800 two slaves who ran away from their master on the island of Tortola found refuge on one of the Cays where they lived and worked with a free black man for some time before they were apprehended.<sup>20</sup> To discourage free blacks and whites who habitually offered assistance to runaways, the law made provision for a fine of £20 for the first offence, £50 for the second, and £100 for the third. Such fines were to be paid to the slave owner as compensation for the loss of labour and his or her slave. Failure to pay the amount specified would result in imprisonment. On the other hand, an enslaved person who was found guilty of assisting runaways in any way could receive a public flogging of up to 100 lashes.<sup>21</sup>

In the search for and apprehension of runaways, some slaves on individual estates were sent out as part of hunting parties. In fact some slaves were even designated as hunters. On the Belle Vue Estate one such individual, Welcome, a male slave aged 25, was sent in search of a group of runaways in the early 1800s. Having spent five unsuccessful days he returned to the estate where he was severely whipped and ordered to resume the search. A few days later, he again returned unsuccessful and was again beaten severely

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Clause. II

<sup>20</sup> PP1826 Third Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Administration of the Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies, (5 October 1826), 86.

<sup>21</sup> PP1789 Copies of Several Acts for the Regulation of Slaves Passed in the West Indies, Tortola, No. 12 'An Act for the Government of Negro and other slave,' 1783, Sec. VIII.



and sent out a third time. Weakened from his ordeal, Welcome returned to the Belle Vue estate a third time unsuccessful. In spite of his condition, he was whipped a third time and put in heavy irons with puddings on his legs and a crock around his neck. At night he was also placed in the stocks with very little food. In a few days he died. Not being a runaway himself, Welcome suffered dearly because his colleagues were able to cover their tracks so well making it impossible for him to find them. It might have even been possible that the slaves in question were able to make it by boat to one of the neighbouring islands.<sup>22</sup>

There was a concern in the Virgin Islands that enslaved individuals who absented themselves from their duties would try to get to Puerto Rico by small boat and as a result a substantial reward of £300 was offered to any enslaved person who would give information to the authority about escape plans that they were aware of.<sup>23</sup> While we cannot be certain how effective this law was, there are indications that the problem continued. Hence, we see that in 1787 an Act was passed regulating the use of fishing boats. Under this new Act enslaved individuals were not permitted to venture out to sea in fishing boats without a white man being present. At night the boats were required to be secured to prevent them from being used by runaway slaves. Boat owners who failed to adhere to these measures faced a penalty of £50.<sup>24</sup>

After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, there were suggestions that there was a reduction in the number of incidents of absenteeism in the British Caribbean as compared to previous years. This decline was in part due to the creolization of the slave society and the development of extensive family and friendship ties among the

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<sup>22</sup> A Report of the Trial of Arthur Hodge Esquire, 1812: Deposition of Stephen McKeough, 10 March 1811.

<sup>23</sup> PP1789 Copies of Several Acts for the Regulation of Slaves Passed in the West Indies, Tortola, No. 12 'An Act for the Government of Negro and other slave,' 1783, Sec. XXI.

<sup>24</sup> C.O. 315/1 Virgin Islands Act, 1887, Clause II.

enslaved. While the slave registers produced after 1817 give an indication of slaves who were listed as runaways, it is still difficult to get an accurate count of the number of slaves who ran away from their masters. This is because slaveholders had varying interpretations of the length of time that constituted removal of the names of slaves who ran away. In St. Vincent it was discovered that the slaveholders only removed the names of slaves from their registers after they had been absent for up to five years as it was hoped that they would return willingly or be recaptured.<sup>25</sup>

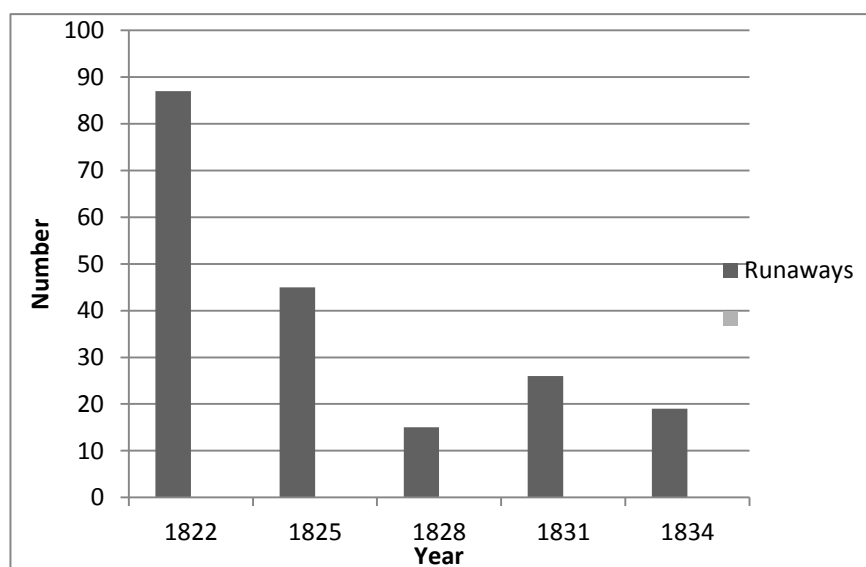
As was stated earlier, about two per cent of the slave population in the British Caribbean was absent without leave at any one time. In the Virgin Islands for the period 1822-1834 a total of 192 slaves were recorded as absent during the five registration periods. Each registration period lasted for approximately two months and only recorded those slaves that were absent at the time of registration. Thus we can recognise as with other Caribbean colonies, that the number of runaway slaves in the Virgin Islands was clearly underreported. In an attempt to make a projection of what the actual number of runaways was likely to have been we can annualize the figures presented [ $192/10 \times 12 = 230$ ]. Thus the projected number of runaway slaves in the Virgin Islands over the period of a year would have been, about 230, which based on an average population of 5,890 slaves represented a runaway rate of about 3.9 per cent. Further, based on these projections the number of slaves who ran away during the period 1822 to 1834 could have been around 3,680 slaves.<sup>26</sup> These adjusted figures show that the rate of runaways in the Virgin Islands was probably above the regional average and gives a clear indication of the level of autonomy the slaves in the colony craved for themselves. Evidence from Barbados shows that in 1817 the rate of runaways was 0.06 per cent for

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<sup>25</sup> B.W. Higman, *Slave Population in the British Caribbean 1807-1834* (London: John Hopkins Press, 1984), 386 – 392.

<sup>26</sup> T71/ 371-375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers

rural slaves and 0.22 per cent for urban slaves.<sup>27</sup> By Barbadian standards, absenteeism in the Virgin Islands was evidently high.



**Figure 4.1** Frequency of Runaway Slaves, The Virgin Islands Slave Database.

In spite of the limitations in the reported cases of runaway slaves in the Virgin Island, the data allows us to examine trends and the factors that facilitated or prohibited this act of defiance on the part of the enslaved. Figure 4.1 above shows that the largest number of runaways (87) was recorded in 1822. One of the factors that could have contributed to this relatively high rate of absenteeism might well have been the hurricane that struck the colony in 1819. It was reported that there was widespread destruction as a result of the hurricane which would have affected the level of security on estates.<sup>28</sup> In the aftermath of the hurricane the Council and Assembly of the Virgin Islands petitioned the British Government for assistance as the inhabitants of the Colony did not have the means to provide for their needs. The majority of the estates in the colony were destroyed; crops and buildings levelled, slaves' houses blown away. The ground provisions, which the slaves depended on for sustenance, were also destroyed and the

<sup>27</sup> Higman *Slave Population in the British Caribbean*, 387.

<sup>28</sup> C.O. 239/6 Colquhoun to the Earl Bathurst 26 January 1820.

planters had no means to ensure the maintenance of life. In addition to facing destruction by hurricane, the colony was also on the verge of famine. Thus, we can see that faced with such difficulties some of the enslaved absented themselves in search of the means to survive.<sup>29</sup>

Nutritional difficulties were not new to the enslaved. Part of the annual cycle of the slave society included the period of summer, which was often affected by drought and natural disasters and was referred to as the hungry time. During the summer months the crops would have already been harvested and the slaves would have been more on their own without many of the perks that would have been given at other times. Gad Heuman, in his research, found that large numbers of the slaves in Barbados chose that period to run away.<sup>30</sup> Heuman's findings linking an increase in absenteeism during the off season to seasonal nutritional stress, were also supported in part by Higman who stated that 'West Indian slaves certainly suffered from seasonal nutritional stress, as well as subsistence crises resulting from prolonged drought, hurricanes, and interruptions to trade.'<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, it is probable that the difficulty planters in the Virgin Islands had in providing food for the slaves after the destruction by hurricane in 1819 and the slow recovery, resulted in the relatively high numbers of runaways recorded. Reports relating to the 1819 hurricane highlighted the fact that about fourteen white persons were killed by the storms including the President of the colony.<sup>32</sup> Some of these individuals might have been slave owners and their death at that time would have created great uncertainty on the part of the enslaved. In one particular case six slaves from the estate of the deceased

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Heuman, 'Runaway Slaves,' 599.

<sup>31</sup> Higman, *Slave Population in the British Caribbean*, 215.

<sup>32</sup> C.O. 239/6 Colquham to the Earl Bathurst 26 January 1820

President were listed as runaways. Where the slaves had developed an attachment to their master such deaths would have left them fearing for the future over which they had no control. When John Pickering, the governor of the Virgin Islands died in 1768 it was said that a crowd of about up to 500 of the enslaved surrounded his house wishing to see his body. The crowd was so agitated that even in their mournful state arrangement had to be made to grant their request for fear of an insurrection.<sup>33</sup>

The death of a master inevitably meant great change on the part of the slaves which at times they were not prepared for or willing to go through, causing not only fear but also apprehension. Thus, in their anxiety some slaves viewed that time of uncertainty as an opportunity to run away; some slaves just walked away and assumed the identity of free persons, using to their advantage the confusion that followed the death of their master.<sup>34</sup>

In 1825, the number of recorded runaways in the Virgin Islands dropped by almost 50 per cent in comparison to the number reported in 1822. While the 1819 hurricane had no doubt influenced the rate of absenteeism by 1825, its effect, while still being felt, would not have been as intense.<sup>35</sup> This time around it was probable that the large scale, internal and external, transfer of enslaved persons outlined in Chapter 2, prompted some individuals to absent themselves with the hope of becoming free. Earlier we discussed the response of the slaves on the Josiah's Bay plantation, when it was decided that they would be transferred to Trinidad. Prior to the time of departure, the slaves were restless and a confrontation amongst them, which also involved the manager of the estate, resulted in several of them absenting themselves from the estate.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> C.F. Jenkins, *Tortola : A Quaker experiment of long ago in the tropics* (Road Town: Caribbean Printing, 1972), 42.

<sup>34</sup> John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University, Press 1999), 19-21.

<sup>35</sup> T71/ 371-375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831, 1834.

<sup>36</sup> C.O.239/10 George R. Porter to The Earl of Bathurst, 15 June 1824.

In 1828, there was a further reduction in the number of slaves who were absent, from 45 in 1825 to 15, a 66 per cent reduction. Three years later, in 1831, the number of absences increased by just over 70 per cent to 26.<sup>37</sup> This increase was probably due to the level of unease in the community resulting from a failed plot by the slaves to take their freedom by force. Such an action, as we will see shortly, gave rise to feelings of distrust on the part of slaveholders and greater scrutiny of the activities of the enslaved. In short, this meant that some of the liberties which some slaves had attained were taken away. Such a response was not uncommon, as Dr. Thomas Coke in reviewing the work of Methodist missionaries in the Caribbean stated: that as a result of an attempted uprising in the Virgin Islands in 1790, slaves were not permitted to meet together for religious purposes unless one of the missionaries was present.<sup>38</sup>

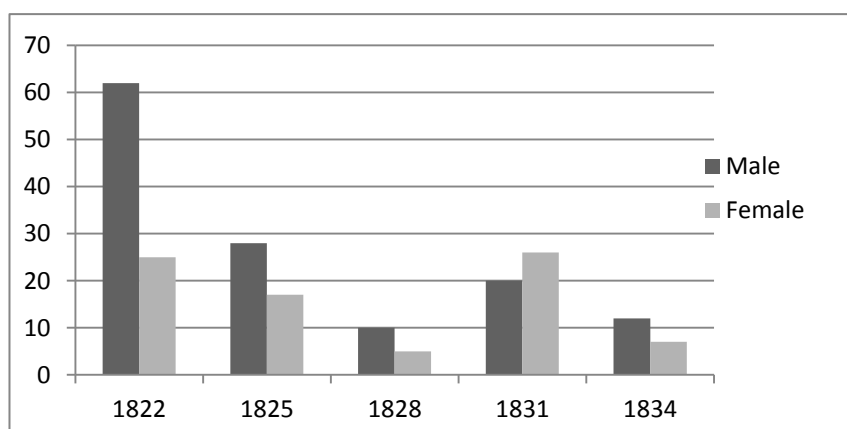
As the discussion about general emancipation got under way and indeed was agreed to, we see the number of runaways fall to their lowest level in 1834. This decrease does not in itself mean that the slaves were content to wait for freedom to be given to them, but, instead probably indicates greater vigilance and policing on the part of slaveholders, who had a financial incentive to hold on to the enslaved. Following the 1831 conspiracy (to be discussed shortly) a local militia with up to 489 enlistees was established in the Virgin Islands and stationed strategically across the colony on Tortola, Anegada, Spanish Town and Jost Van Dyke. The largest company comprising 85 men, was made up of recruits from among liberated Africans and was stationed in the capital, Road Town. It should also be noted that while on average the registration lasted for up to two months, in 1834 the whole process was completed in about three

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<sup>37</sup> T71/ 371-375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island* (1811), 124.

weeks (3<sup>rd</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> February). Planters were evidently keen to get their slaveholdings fully registered at that point in time<sup>39</sup>



**Figure 4.2** Frequency of Runaway Slaves by Gender , The Virgin Islands Slave Database.

The Virgin Islands Slave Database also allows us to distinguish runaways by gender, age, place of birth, skin colour and place of residence. The data set out in the following Tables and Figures helps us to get a better understanding about runaways in the Virgin Islands during the period 1822 -1834. Figure 4.2 above shows that throughout the period 1822-1834 the number of male slaves who ran away consistently outnumbered the female slaves who also ran away. Male runaways outnumbered the female runaways by more than 2:1. This was in spite of the fact that in the general slave population both genders were almost equal in number. In Barbados where the slave population had attained an equal number of males and females by the mid-eighteenth century, a sample of 368 runaway slaves in the nineteenth century also had a large proportion of males. This situation does not in any way indicate that male slaves had a greater opportunity to run away than female slaves, but points to the reality that females had more ties to community with regards to their domestic duties and responsibility for child care.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the Virgin Islands where running away also meant being able to quit the

<sup>39</sup> C.O. 239/6 Maxwell to Earl Bathurst, 19 November 1831.

<sup>40</sup> Heuman, 'Runaway Slaves,' 596.

islands through what Hall referred to as maritime marronage, women were less likely to use that means. Thus it is possible that the experience of the female slaves in the Virgin Islands might have been similar to those of female slaves in Barbados where they were less likely to run away in a bid for freedom. The fact that Table 4.1 below reveals that up to 10 per cent of the absentees were children under the age of 14 leads us to conclude that in spite of difficulties and constraints enslaved females absented themselves, taking their children with them in the hope of attaining freedom.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 4.1** Percentage of Runaway or Absent Slaves by Age and Gender.

Virgin Islands			
Age	Male	Female	Total
0-4	1.6	5.9	2.8
5-9	3.9	3.9	3.9
10-14	3.2	3.9	3.4
15-19	9.5	2.0	7.3
20-24	13.4	5.9	11.2
25-29	15.0	19.6	16.3
30-34	13.4	13.7	13.5
35-39	9.5	17.7	11.8
40-44	10.2	11.8	10.7
45-49	7.1	3.9	6.2
50-54	6.3	0.0	4.5
55-59	5.5	5.9	5.6
60+	1.6	5.9	2.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

One researcher, Thompson, observed that slaves in the Caribbean ran away at all ages and in particular he identified the oldest runaway slave on record as a 90 year-old male in Haiti.<sup>42</sup> Table 4.1 above shows that the slaves who ran away in the Virgin Islands covered a wide age range from 0-4 years to 60 and above. The majority of the

<sup>41</sup>Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels :A social history of enslaved black women in Barbados* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 169.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *The Flight to Freedom*, 64.



runaways, 70 per cent, fall in the active group age 15 to age 44. They were the slaves who shouldered most of the work on the estate and their absence no doubt impacted the rate and level of work being undertaken on the estates. Additionally, with regards to strength, these were also the individuals who were best able to successfully evade attempts to apprehend and return them to slave-holders. Close to 20 per cent of the absentee enslaved individuals were considered old – age 45 and above. In the Virgin Islands the average age of runaway slaves recorded during the period 1822-1834 was 32 years.

In 1825, two children, Joseph aged one and Maria aged four, were carried away by their mothers in a bid for freedom and in 1834, two other children, both of whom were age one, were also listed as absent along with their mothers. The four children already mentioned lived on the island of Tortola. But there was also evidence of a child, Ann, who lived on one of the Cays and was taken by her mother, Ruth aged 26, as she made her escape in 1822. The indications are that children under the age of 14 years who were listed as runaways were most commonly in the company of an adult who might or might not have been a parent.<sup>43</sup>

**Table 4.2** Average Age of Slave Runaways by Categories.

	Male	Female	Overall
Virgin Is.	32	33	32
Tortola	33	31.6	32
The Cays	29	36	31
Africans	40	34.5	38.8
Coloureds	28	27	27

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

<sup>43</sup> T71/371-375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers.

Other means of classifying runaways are by place of residence, place of birth and skin colour. The findings from the database in relation to these classifications are set out in Table 4.2. From the data it is evident that the category of slaves who ran away and who had the lowest average age was the coloured slaves. This group of slaves which formed part of Creole society, contained a relatively high proportion of child runaways. The mean age of African born runaways by comparison was some 10 years older than those born in the Virgin Islands. The African born slaves, as stated earlier, were brought to the colony before the abolition of the slave trade. With regards to place of residence, on the island of Tortola the average age of absentee was 32 years, a figure only slightly higher than that found for runaways on the Cays. Unlike place of birth, place of residence seems to have had little impact on the mean age of runaways in the Virgin Islands.

While the slave register recorded the individual slaves as being absent, there is no indication as to where they went. To solve this mystery we can refer to a report written by Major Moody, one of the commissioners appointed to investigate the condition of liberated Africans in the Virgin Islands. Moody assessed the social and financial situation in the Virgin Islands in the 1820s to determine if the colony could support the African apprentices when their term of apprenticeship expired. Bonaparte, a 26 year-old African apprentice, told Moody that he and two other apprentices paid half a dollar each to be taken to the Danish island of St Thomas on board a boat belonging to the Belle Mount estate that was captained by a slave. Jim, another African apprentice, swore an affidavit before President Porter on July 28, 1823, that he along with three other slaves, had stolen a boat and ran away to St. Thomas.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> PP 1825 (114) Report by the Commission of Inquiry into the State of African Apprenticed in the West Indies, No 1 (16 March 1825) 58, 68.

Prior to 1807 the slaves in the Virgin Islands ran away to the island of Puerto Rico but in the final decades of slavery, the destination of choice was the Danish island of St. Thomas. In 1815 freedmen made up 51.8 per cent of the free population on the island of St Thomas and as a result of urbanization, the population of Charlotte Amalie, the capital of St Thomas, was proportionally higher than the population in the rural areas of the island. The growing importance of the town as a free port also resulted in the migration of freemen and enslaved individuals from other Caribbean colonies to St Thomas.<sup>45</sup> In this environment there was always the chance that absentees who lived outside of the law in St Thomas would be caught, imprisoned and put to work in chain gangs and if not claimed by their holders, be sold into slavery. Such was the experience of an African apprentice, James aged 32, who left Tortola and was living in St. Thomas where one night he was arrested by the police and put in jail. James said that he was placed in a chain gang digging dirt and breaking rocks until his master, Dr. Porter, the President of the Virgin Islands, paid his redemption fee.<sup>46</sup>

A further indication that some of the enslaved who absented themselves were living in St Thomas relates to Diana a 42 year-old enslaved woman. In a sworn statement dated December 19, 1824, Catherine Harper, a white slaveholder, declared that in 1817 Diana left Tortola and went to St. Thomas. Harper claimed that her request for Diana's return to the Virgin Islands in 1818 went unheeded but she again made a similar plea in 1824 to which Diana responded stating that she would return only if she would be allowed to purchase her freedom. Harper agreed to the condition and Diana returned to the Virgin Islands and was registered as a returned absentee in 1825 and was subsequently manumitted.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Neville A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies St Thomas, St John and St Croix* (ed) B.W. Higman (Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press: 1992) p. 87, 178-180.

<sup>46</sup>PP 1825 (114) Report by the Commission of Inquiry into the State of African Apprenticed in the West Indies, 56.

<sup>47</sup>T71/372 Virgin Island Slave Register 1825 Catherine Harper, Affidavit, 19 December 1824.

Additionally, in 1834 an enslaved woman, Betsey age 28, was registered as a return absentee and her three children, Lewie age 9, James age 5 and Johann Augusta age 2, were added as new entries to the register. What was most revealing about this transaction was that the place of birth of all the children was listed as St. Thomas which indicates that Betsey had lived on St. Thomas for at least nine years. While we cannot be certain, it is possible that her return was prompted by the pending general emancipation which was already agreed. In the proposed law, two of the three children would be free as of the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1834.<sup>48</sup>

To all indications, as in the case of Diana above, the slaves in the Virgin Islands used running away as a means to negotiate conditions with respect to manumissions. In 1822, 12 year old John was sold by his owner, Mary Ann Austin, to Frances Ingram. Three years later in 1825, John was reported absent and after his return in 1828 he was sold to Mr. Charles Lloyd who in 1831 reported that he had manumitted him. Another slave with a similar experience was Bristol aged 59, who was sold by Elizabeth Simpson and rented to William Lockey in the period 1818/1822. During the same period Bristol absented himself and when he returned was sold first to John Stabo and then to Charles Lloyd who manumitted him.<sup>49</sup>

In the British Caribbean, after the abolition of the slave trade, the number of African-born slaves steadily declined as the Creole population increased. Similarly, the number of coloured slaves, while small, saw a continued increase. In the Virgin Islands during the period 1818-1834, African-born slaves made up about nine per cent of the entire slave population. Coloured slaves while being fewer in number, accounted for about

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<sup>48</sup> T71/375 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1834

<sup>49</sup> T71/371 -375 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1822 - 1834

eight per cent of the total slave population. When we take into consideration the number of absences in relation to the total enslaved population and the difference with regards to place of birth and skin colour, it was found that each accounted for about ten per cent of the total absences. Similarly, it was also found that runaway slaves in the colony's capital, Road Town, made up about 10 per cent of the total number of absences during the period 1818-1834.<sup>50</sup>

**Table 4.3** Percentage of Runaway Slaves from Road Town, 1818- 1834.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>5-9</b>	11.1	0	<b>11.1</b>
<b>15-19</b>	0	5.6	<b>5.6</b>
<b>20-24</b>	0	5.6	<b>5.6</b>
<b>25-29</b>	0	11.1	<b>11.1</b>
<b>30-34</b>	0	11.1	<b>11.1</b>
<b>35-39</b>	5.6	11.1	<b>16.7</b>
<b>40-44</b>	5.6	0	<b>5.6</b>
<b>45-49</b>	16.7	0	<b>16.7</b>
<b>50-54</b>	11.1	0	<b>11.1</b>
<b>55-59</b>	5.6	0	<b>5.6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>44.4</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

The data in Table 4.3 is important in distinguishing urban and rural patterns and others will be interested in them. Unlike the other sub-categories of runaway slaves, among the runaways from Road Town there was a narrower margin of difference between the percentage of those who were male, (55.6 per cent) and those who were female (44.4 per cent). These figures show that among the enslaved in the Town, females as well as males, were almost equally likely to become absentees. The female runaways were all under the age of 39, which suggests that they were all relatively young and in a position to benefit fully from freedom and further establish themselves in preparation for

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

emancipation. On the other hand, the male runaway slaves from the Town were above the age of 35 which shows that these individuals who had spent most of their lives as slaves still craved freedom. Living in the Town also meant that these individuals were in a better position than their counterparts in the rural areas of the colony to make the contacts necessary to successfully plan their getaway (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 also shows that runaways from Road Town, who were in their most productive years (between age 15-19 and age 40-44), made up about 55.7% of the total number of absentees in the Town. Even more interesting is the fact that while 100% of the female slaves fell in the most productive category (age 15-19 to age 40-44), only 20% of the male slaves fell in the same category. The largest percentage of absentee males from the Town (60%), were individuals who were described as old. The children, who were listed as runaways accompanying their parents, were all males age 5-9 and made up 11.1 per cent of the total number of the runaways from the Town. Further analysis of runaways from Road Town reveals that about 22 per cent were African-born, the majority of whom were male. Amongst the enslaved Creoles however, there was an even split among the males and females. However, while the majority of the female runaways were in the prime working age group (20-44), only 28.5 per cent of the male slaves fell into that age group.<sup>51</sup>

The high incidence of running away in the Virgin Islands is a clear indication of the levels of autonomy that were craved among the enslaved in the colony. From the early stages of the colony's establishment it was found that it was almost impossible to prevent such actions. While the destination of choice in the 1700s was Puerto Rico, in the 1800s there was a shift to the nearby island of St. Thomas. Coloured slaves and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

slaves resident in the Town accounted for a proportionately higher numbers of runaways in relation to their number in the population. The runaways from the Town comprised an equal number of males and females. However, with the females falling in the younger age groups under the age of 39, the males fell in the older age groups aged 35 and older.

### **Day-to-Day Resistance**

While slaves who ran away from their masters publicly demonstrated their non-acceptance of their status as slaves, other slaves who remained on the estates showed noncompliance or resistance in different forms. These varying approaches to resistance were manifested throughout the period of slavery on a day to day basis and, because of their subtle nature, were at times difficult to 'identify as intentional.'<sup>52</sup> Most of these acts, which at times were directed at the economic infrastructure, included sabotage of the plantation machinery, destruction of sugar cane by fire and poisoning or maiming animals. In a way these were the only options available to those slaves who found themselves suppressed by a system over which they had no control. The goal of the slaves, then, was not to overthrow the institution of slavery - as they were aware of the ramifications of open attacks on the system - but to undermine the system from within. Their tactics also yielded short-term benefits as their actions disrupted the pace of their work, rendering it more manageable if only for a short period. One of the ironies, however, is the fact that the enslaved achieved their greatest levels of autonomy when they accommodated some of the dictates of the system that furthered their goals and aspirations. This was a very critical process, as accommodation in itself for the enslaved was "a way of accepting what could not be helped without falling prey to the pressures

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to slavery in the British West Indies*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 53.

of dehumanization, emasculation, and self-hatred.”<sup>53</sup> As the slaves attained certain levels of autonomy within their lives, they also engaged in labour-bargaining in an effort to improve their working conditions.<sup>54</sup>

In the Virgin Islands there was evidence that slaves were passively resisting their enslavement from the early stages of slavery in the colony. The records reveal that around the middle of the eighteenth century, six male slaves who were purchased from a slave ship and put to work on one of the Cays, committed suicide by hanging themselves. This particular group of slaves no doubt found their enslavement intolerable and saw death as the preferred option.<sup>55</sup> Orlando Patterson found that there was a common belief among enslaved Africans that when they died their spirits would return to Africa thereby reinstating them as free persons. Such a belief, it was felt, was one of the main reasons why some slaves decided to take their own life.<sup>56</sup>

Short of taking their own lives, some of the slaves also found self-mutilation a decisive tool to lessen the impact of slavery. In 1793 eight enslaved persons, two women and six men, on several estates on Tortola, agreed together to cut off their right or left hand so as to make it difficult for them to carry out the work that was required of them. While this act did not exempt the slaves from work entirely, it resulted in them being only assigned tasks that were within their strength and ability. During the latter part of the 1700s it was also reported that attempts at arson were so frequent in the Virgin Islands that the young white men of the Town formed themselves into an association with the

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<sup>53</sup>Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 598.

<sup>54</sup>Mary Turner, Slave Workers, “Subsistence and Labour Bargaining: Amity Hall, Jamaica, 1805 – 1832” *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1991), 92-106.

<sup>55</sup>PP1790 Minutes of the Evidence Taken Before the House of Commons 1790: Testimony of Thomas Woolrich (26 & 27 March 1790), 264-291.

<sup>56</sup>Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An analysis of the origins, development and structure of Negro slavery in Jamaica* (London: Grenada Publishing, 1967), 195.



express purpose of patrolling at night to prevent and or detect such attempts.<sup>57</sup> By the 1800s that situation had greatly improved but there remained other subtle acts of defiance that threatened the safety of the ruling class. One such situation related to several incidences of stone throwing in the Town on Sunday nights. At a special meeting of the House of Assembly and the Privy Council on January 25, 1817, a motion was passed offering a reward of \$400 to anyone who provided information leading to the arrest of the perpetrator or perpetrators. In the case of any accomplice who came forward a free pardon was also offered.<sup>58</sup>

There were also more personal situations that caused unease among the white population. In 1807, Arthur Hodge, the owner of the Belle Vue estate accused two enslaved women, Margaret the cook and Else the washer, of plotting to poison his wife and children. Hodge took matters into his own hands and punished the women severely by pouring boiling water down their throats, which subsequently resulted in their death. On September 27, 1817, William Glover, a member of the House of Assembly, informed the House that he had heard it being said publicly that an attempt was made to poison the Robertson family by their enslaved servants. Glover further stated that he was made to understand that Dr. Doty had attended to the individuals. Upon a motion of the House, the Clerk summoned Dr. Doty to the next meeting of the Council scheduled for Saturday 4, October, 1817. When Dr. Doty appeared before the House, he was questioned by the Speaker, and the matter was discussed, but no resolution was made.<sup>59</sup> Clearly, it was difficult for anyone, even a medical doctor, to prove that a slave had administered poison to someone<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> CO239/11 George Robert Porter: Report on the progress of civilization among the Negroes from 1784 to 1824, (13 February 1824).

<sup>58</sup> CO 316/3 Minutes of the Virgin Islands House of Assembly, 25 July 1817.

<sup>59</sup> C.O. 316/3 Minute of the Virgin Island House of Assembly, 27 September 1817 and 4 October 1817.

<sup>60</sup> The Trial of Arthur Hodge: Deposition of Pereen Georges, 4 March 1811

The white slave holders had a deep-seated fear of the enslaved because it was felt that through the practice of Obeah they had special knowledge of poisons which they could use to kill or incapacitate others. Orlando Patterson says that “Obeah was essentially a type of sorcery which largely involved harming others at the request of clients, by use of charms, poisons, and shadow catching. It was an individual practice, performed by a professional who was paid by his clients.”<sup>61</sup> In the latter part of the eighteenth century it was felt that many of the enslaved, both men and women, were practitioners of Obeah and that they provided poison that was administered by domestics to individuals and whole families causing their death. This long-standing suspicion by the white population in the Virgin Islands was confirmed to some extent in 1820 when an elderly enslaved individual who was believed to be a practitioner of Obeah made a death bed confession to that effect, accepting responsibility for poisoning at least 15 white persons, several of whom died.<sup>62</sup>

The life of the enslaved was centred around and governed by their work. On sugar plantations in particular, it was relentless, thus making slaves the most important contributors to the colonies’ economic output. As early as October 1800, about two thirds of the enslaved on the Belle Vue Estate absented themselves in an attempt to force the manager to grant them certain privileges. Their efforts, however, were not successful as the manager of the estate felt he did not have the authority to grant the concessions. Hence, when the gang returned to the estate two weeks later the manager gave them the choice of staying away or being flogged and they opted for the latter and

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<sup>61</sup> Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, 185-186.

<sup>62</sup>C.O. 239/11 George Robert Porter :Report on the progress of civilization among the Negroes from 1784 to 1824 13 February 1824; Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, 185-195; Mary Turner, *Slave and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Jamaica: The University of The west Indies 1998),54-57; Michael Craton, *Sinews of Empire A Short History of British Slavery* (London: Temple Maurice Smith ltd.1974),218-219

returned to their work.<sup>63</sup> On the Josiah's Bay Estate after the 1819 hurricane the enslaved were left to survive on their own and when they were called back to work, they refused and absented themselves. The standoff was ended when the overseer who was disliked more than most overseers, was relieved of duty.<sup>64</sup>

William Roger Isaac, a local merchant and member of the House of Assembly in the Virgin Islands, provided another example of the enslaved using work as a negotiating tool to resolve conflict. In debating the conditions of slaves in the colony during a sitting of the House, Isaac spoke about the latitude that was afforded the enslaved in the colony in dealing with their grievances. He reminded the members of the House that recently when the enslaved on a particular estate were experiencing what they considered hardship, they staged a protest and assembled in the Town to lodge a formal complaint.<sup>65</sup>

It is likely that Isaac was in fact speaking from a first-hand experience since the firm in which he was partner (Crabb and Isaac) served as the attorney responsible for the majority of the sugar estates operating in the colony. Clearly, there were some issues that were emerging with respect to the management of the estates and in particular the treatment of the slaves. This point was expressed by one of the Methodist missionaries when he appeared before a joint committee of the Virgin Islands House of Assembly and the Board of the Privy Council on December 23, 1830. Reverend Whitehouse expressed the view that, "the practice lately of importing men from Europe taken from the plough or similar labour, to serve as managers or overseers on Estates was an evil

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<sup>63</sup> Abraham Mendes Belisario, *A Report on the Trial of Arthur Hodge for the Murder of his Negro Slave Named Prosper*: Sworn Testimony of Daniel Ross, (1812), 133 – 135.

<sup>64</sup> C.O. 239/10 George R. Porter to The Earl Barthurst, 15 June 1824.

<sup>65</sup> Letters from the Virgin Islands: Illustrating life and Manners in the West Indies (London, 1843), 226.

tendency.”<sup>66</sup> The following year, 1831, it was reported that on one of the Lettsome estates the house of the overseer was burnt by one of the enslaved labourers on the estate. Overall it was said that there was increased discontent and excitement among the slaves which resulted in them leaving the estates if and when they wanted to and working at their own pleasure. This situation led one absentee owner to conclude that the enslaved were behaving as if they were their own masters.<sup>67</sup>

### **Adaptation**

Subsistence crises in the British Caribbean during the latter half of the eighteenth century forced plantation owners in the region to rethink their economic strategy. Continued focus on the production of tropical staples for export while at the same time being totally dependent on the importation of food supplies and equipment needed to be addressed. When shipping was disrupted by war and other calamities, supplies became scarce and even when available could be expensive. The consequence then was dire. When the enslaved were poorly fed they suffered more than normally from malnutrition, which seriously affected their ability to perform their work and in turn impacted negatively on the levels of profit the planters expected.<sup>68</sup>

The solution to this problem centred on having the enslaved plant as much of the food they required as possible. In spite of the difficulties and sacrifices that would have been required, such an approach would prove to be cost effective while at the same time lowering dependence on food imports. In the Leeward Islands - hardest hit by the disruption of trade with the United States after 1793 - legislation was enacted in 1798

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<sup>66</sup> CO239/26 Report of the Joint Committee of the Board of Council and the House of Assembly, 23 December 1830.

<sup>67</sup> CO239/26 McQueen to Goderich, 7 September 1831.

<sup>68</sup> Woodville K. Marshall, “Provision Ground and Plantation Labour in Four Windward Islands: Competition for Resources during Slavery,” in *The Slaves’ Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* eds. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan in *Slavery and Abolition Vol. 12 No. 1* (1991), 48-67; Sidney W. Mintz, “The Origins of the Jamaican Market System” in *The Slavery Reader* ed. Gad Heuman and James Walvin (London: Routledge, 2003), 521 -544.

requiring plantation owners to allocate plots of land to the enslaved for the purpose of planting their own food. To ensure that the system of local food production achieved the desired goals, the enslaved were allowed time off from their regular work to plant and tend their provision grounds. Through this activity, the enslaved learned “to budget their own time, to judge soil quality, to select seed, to cultivate and harvest, to prepare food for sale; and otherwise to make the proto-peasant sector successful.” In short, these activities allowed the enslaved to develop certain levels of autonomy as they worked for the benefit of themselves and their families.<sup>69</sup>

In their desperate attempt to reduce their food import bill, slave owners utilized their power and resources to burden the enslaved with what should have been their responsibility. The enslaved, however, made accommodation for the demands of the system and not only produced food but also learnt the values of self-reliance and personal responsibility. In addition to planting food, the enslaved also kept animals and after they had fed themselves, sold the excess in the market. In essence, the provision grounds gave the enslaved a level of control within their lives and provided them with an opportunity to participate in what was later described as the internal or slaves economy. As was envisioned by slaveholders, the provision grounds brought a sense of stability for the enslaved as they had a greater stake in the colony, though it did not deter all slaves from running away or even resisting in other ways. This attachment became so intense that the enslaved saw the provision ground as their personal land, which was passed on from one generation to another.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, “From Plantations to Peasantries” in *The Caribbean in Caribbean Contours* ed. Sidney W. Mintz and Sally Price (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 135; Gad Heuman, “The Caribbean” in *Brief Histories: A series* ed. Jeremy Black (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 31-33.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

The consolidated Leeward Islands Slave Act only formalized what was already common practice in the region. In the Virgin Islands, it was apparent that in the latter half of the eighteenth century the enslaved were successful at their personal agricultural pursuits - in the planting of staples and the keeping of animals. This success, however, posed a threat to white small land-holders as they were unable to compete against the slaves. To remedy this situation, the 1783 Virgin Islands Slave Act prohibited the enslaved from planting cotton and keeping cattle and horses. The Law surmised that it was common practice in the colony for slave owners to allow the enslaved to plant cotton for their own gain and proprietors who continued in the practice would be subject to prosecution. Additionally, slaveholders were also chastised for giving licence to the enslaved - allowing them to keep cattle and horses, the financial gain from which, it was believed, would give the enslaved a false sense of accomplishment, to the detriment of the whole system of discipline which needed to be maintained. The keeping of goats and pigs by the slaves, however, was allowed.<sup>71</sup>

In Barbados where the white ruling class attempted to limit the economic activities of the enslaved through legislation, the outcome was that the enslaved “resisted such legislative assaults upon this aspect of their independent economic activities.” The enslaved were determined to maintain the concession they had attained and were prepared to fight to that effect. Therefore individual slaveholders, in the interest of “social stability and high levels of productivity”, adopted a hands-off attitude with regards to the economic pursuits of the enslaved.<sup>72</sup> In the Virgin Islands, while there were laws in place to limit and even prohibit the involvement of the enslaved in some economic ventures - in particular the keeping of horned cattle - the laws were not rigidly

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<sup>71</sup> BPP 1788-89 A Statement of the Laws at Large Respecting Negroes in the West India Islands Part III Virgin Islands.

<sup>72</sup> Hilary McD Beckles, “An Economic Life of Their Own: Slaves as Commodity Producers and Distributors in Barbados,” in *The Slaves’ Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* eds. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan *Abolition and Slavery Vol. 12 No. 1* (1991), 31.

enforced, if at all. That said, it was common knowledge in the colony that the enslaved owned large numbers of horned cattle and in some instances these animals were hired by proprietors to work on their estates.<sup>73</sup>

This legal oversight within the Virgin Islands was also recognised and accepted even by the Chief Justice who in 1826, informed the members of a Judicial Review Commission that while the laws of the colony prohibited slaves from owning certain types of property, they were not prevented as such, and were able to own and dispose of property which was valued at considerable sums.<sup>74</sup> This property included cattle, goats, hogs, cotton and provisions most of which was produced in lots assigned by their slave masters. Furthermore, the ever-increasing number of abandoned estates in the Virgin Islands resulted in a wide range of unused land, which was utilized by the enslaved to cultivate provisions and pasture their animals. In Chapter 2, for example, it was noted that in 1823 the only area of the economy that saw any growth with regards to production was in the area of livestock rearing and the planting of provisions.<sup>75</sup>

The general situation respecting slaves producing their own food was highlighted by three estate managers, Gordon Atkin, Christian Roelefson and Robert Shew, in reports to a special committee of the Virgin Islands House of Assembly. The managers all stated that enslaved people on the estates they were managing were given access to as much land as they needed for the purpose of planting ground provision and keeping animals. There was a standard policy that slaves were given one day a week out of crop time (July – January) to work in their provision grounds. Additionally, some slaves also

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<sup>73</sup> The West India Sketch Book, Vol. II (London: 1834), 178.

<sup>74</sup> PP 1826-27(36) Commission of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies, (1826), 87.

<sup>75</sup> PP 1825(115) II Slave Trade, No.3, Major Moody's Report (1825), 131; The West India Sketch Book Vol. II (London: 1834), 178.

had the advantage of fishing and with regard to specific estates were allowed to use the estates' boats in their free time.<sup>76</sup> There is evidence to reinforce these suggestions. For example, in 1823 slaves owned a total of 23 boats in the colony. These were used for fishing as a means of supplementing slaves' diets and augmenting their income by the sale of excess fish. There is also evidence on the ownership of livestock by slaves, as noted in Table 4.4.<sup>77</sup>

**Table 4.4** Livestock Ownership in the Virgin Islands in 1823

Live Stock	Ownership				Total
	Free People		Slaves		
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Horses	202	84	38	16	240
Cattle	1659	64	938	36	2597
Goats	1098	34	2125	66	3225
Pigs	617	34	1208	66	1825
Poultry	10930	25	33120	75	44050
Sheep	11442	100	0	0	11442
Mules & Asses	529	100	0	0	529

Source: PP 1825 (115) II Slave Trade No. 3 Major Moody's Report

Table 4.4 draws on information compiled by Major Moody and shows that in 1823, with the exception of mules, asses and sheep, the slaves in the Virgin Islands possessed a significant, and in some cases, the largest percentage of these types of livestock in the colony. While the enslaved were not meant to be in possession of horses and cattle, in 1823 they actually owned 16 per cent of the horses in the colony and some 36 per cent (938) of the cattle. Being in possession of such a large quantity of cattle in particular brought great financial benefit to the enslaved, not only from renting them as beasts of

<sup>76</sup> C.O. 239/25 Report of the Joint Committee of the Board of Council and House of Assembly, No.4 Report on Great Carrot Bay Estate, No.5 Report on Lower Estate and No.6 Report on Hannah Estate, Sea Cows Bay.

<sup>77</sup> PP1825(115) II Slave Trade, No. 3 Major Mood's Report (1825), 152.



burden but also in the sale of considerable quantities of milk and butter.<sup>78</sup> In fact, it was the keeping of cattle which Joseph Harrigan, a planter who relocated to Trinidad, saw as the only advantage that the enslaved in the Virgin Islands had over enslaved in other British colonies.<sup>79</sup> With regards to the keeping of smaller livestock and animals such goats, pigs and chickens, the slaves possessed up to 75 per cent of the colony's total stock in 1823.

There were also avenues opened to the slaves who were keen on using their 'free time' meaningfully, to collect bundles of firewood and grass, which were readily sold in the Town. As early as 1803, it was observed that the enslaved in the Virgin Islands had the monopoly on supplying the Town with all the basic items that were needed for daily consumption: bread, fresh meat, poultry, vegetables and grass for horses. The colony had a well-established market regulated by an Act of the House of Assembly dated 1788. The Act which regulated the quality of goods that could be sold, strictly prohibited the peddling of goods about the Town and imposed specific fees on individuals who used the market. Sunday was the official market day but fishermen were given special concession to sell fish and turtles any day of the week.<sup>80</sup>

Some thirty years later in 1823, it appears that close to 3,000 enslaved persons in the Virgin Islands 'cultivated on their own account, about 1,675 acres of land, which [was] estimated to yield annually £3110s per acre in total £5,862.10s.' Once the excess produce was sold in the market, the enslaved would have been able to accumulate considerable amounts of money. One official in the Virgin Islands was convinced that,

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<sup>78</sup> C.O.239/25 Report of the Joint Committee of the Board of Council and House of Assembly, No. 5, Report on Lower Estate.

<sup>79</sup> PP 1826-27 (479) Trinidad Negroes, Extract of the Minutes taken by a Committee of the Council of Trinidad: Testimony of Joseph Harrigan.

<sup>80</sup> C.O. 152/85 Letter from Governor Lavington 1803; C.O.315/1 An Act to mark out the extent and limits of Road town in the Island of Tortola to preserve order within the same, to prevent accidents of fire to promote the health of the inhabitants of the said Town and to establish and regulate a Public Market within the same, Clauses 24-28.

in total, the enslaved were in possession of close to £5,000. In particular, it was reported that during the period 1820-1829 an elderly slave on Lower Estate on Tortola died leaving £90 to be divided amongst her children. Virgin Islands slaves, however, were not alone in accumulating wealth. Around the same time, it was reported that in Jamaica there were examples of enslaved individuals who at the time of their death had property worth between £50 and £200. Additionally, it was also estimated that slaves in Jamaica held in their possession up to one-fifth of the currency in circulation in the colony. The capacity this afforded some slaves to shape their lives deserves fuller recognition.<sup>81</sup>

The provision ground system provided an opportunity for the enslaved to effectively resist the formal economy and establish themselves as local producers and distributors of produce. While the formal economy may have declined in Virgin Islands, as evidenced in the abandonment of several estates, the enslaved took advantage of the opportunity to expand their production of provisions. The activities of the enslaved were not discouraged by the slaveholders, as the ability of the enslaved to subsist themselves reduced their dependence on their masters. More importantly, the provision grounds system enabled the enslaved to function independently, which in turn contributed positively towards the development of autonomy as they developed a greater stake in their own future.<sup>82</sup>

## **Conspiracy**

On Sunday, 4 September 1831, just after sunset, a conch shell sounded on the Anderson Estate in Brewers Bay signalling that there was urgent news. In response, several of the men on the neighbouring Martin Estate hurried to Anderson's where they were told by

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<sup>81</sup> C.O. 239/25 Report of the Joint Committee of the Board of Council and House of Assembly, No.5, Report on Lower Estate; BPP1825(115) II Slave Trade, No. 3 Major Mood's Report (1825), 115.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Sheridan, "Strategies of Slave Subsistence The Jamaican Case Reconsidered" in *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas*, ed. Mary Turner (Kingston: Ian Randle 1995) p. 49

one of the women on the estate that the men had gone to Road Town to fight for their freedom. The message that was left was for them to meet outside of the Town at an area called Frances Head, under the plum tree. At Frances Head that night, about 50 slaves gathered awaiting the arrival of other gangs who were to join them from several other estates on the island of Tortola. In all, about 200 men had given their word that they would be a part of the uprising but one of the organisers McDaniel, was disappointed about the turn out. Another organiser, Sam Fahie, was concerned that the designated Captain, Shelly Martin was not present and after some discussions it was decided that the uprising would be postponed until Wednesday of that week.<sup>83</sup>

The next morning, Monday, 5 September, on the Brewers Bay Estate the gang of slaves, with few exceptions, refused to go out to work. Three of the ring leaders of the protest were arrested and taken to Road Town to stand trial but they were followed by the rest of the gang who behaved in what was considered a very disorderly manner. While the matter was being investigated, it was discovered that the slaves had a plot to rise up but it had been postponed because of insufficient numbers.<sup>84</sup> The Virgin Islands' community was thrown into shock and alarm and an urgent message was sent to the Governor in St. Kitts informing him about the situation. Considering the colony's lack of internal defence, the President stated that "we have much to fear unless some assistance is promptly afforded us."<sup>85</sup> In response, the Governor dispatched his private secretary, Major Williams, with a consignment of ammunitions and instructions to assist the colony in mounting a defence. Help was also sought from the Governor of the nearby Danish island of St. Thomas who sent a Danish brig to the aid of the colony.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich 19 November, 1831, Enclosure No.3, Testimony of Collin a Slave belonging to Martin's Brewers Bay Estate.

<sup>84</sup> C.O.239/25 Donovan and Lloyd to Maxwell, 17 September 1831.

<sup>85</sup> C.O.239/25 President Donovan to Governor Maxwell, 8 September 1831.

<sup>86</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 5 October 1831.

The plot, which in fact represented an attempt on the part of the slaves to come together in solidarity to resist their enslavement, caught the slave owners in the Virgin Islands by surprise. Never before in the history of the colony had there been such a concerted attempt at an uprising on the part of the enslaved. Previous incidents of unrest had been confined to specific estates. One such incident occurred on the Josiah's Bay Estate in 1789, when the gang on the estate was said to have attacked the attorney and the manager for the estate with stones forcing them to seek refuge in a house. The attack was said to have continued for hours with the slaves repeatedly trying to gain entrance to the house. In the end the men were rescued when help came from another estate. For their part in the attack two slaves were executed and three banished from the colony.<sup>87</sup>

In the British Caribbean, in general, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the Haitian Revolution, there was a relative period of quiet, but this was broken by the outbreak of major revolts in Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. In all of these revolts, it was determined that one of the key contributing factors that led to them were rumours that freedom was granted by the British Government but was being withheld by the slaveholders. Another feature of all the revolts was that the leaders were slaves who held positions of trust and confidence.<sup>88</sup>

After hearing about the Barbados rebellion in 1816, the House of Assembly in the Virgin Islands "taking into consideration the paucity of the white population" and their general lack of security, called for a company of soldiers to be stationed in the colony.<sup>89</sup>

The request, however, was not supported by the Privy Council, which held the view that

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<sup>87</sup>C.O.239/10 Porter to Maxwell, 15 June 1824.

<sup>88</sup>Michael Craton, "Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellion in the British West Indies 1816-1832" *Past and Present*, No. 85 (1979), 99-125; Claude Levy, Barbados: "The Last Years of Slavery 1823-1833," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (1959), 308-345; Mary Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," *Past and Present*, No. 40 (1968), 108-125.

<sup>89</sup>C.O.316/3 Minutes of the Virgin Islands House of Assembly 20 July 1816.

the colony's interest would be better served in a more cost effective way with the establishment of a police force. To all indications, while the uprising in Barbados had caused some concern there was seemingly no need for alarm and over reaction.<sup>90</sup>

Following the discovery of the aborted plot in the Virgin Islands, a total of 47 enslaved individuals were arrested and tried before the court. One enslaved man, Thomas Caines, agreed to give evidence on the part of the crown and nine enslaved persons were found guilty of the charges and sentenced to death or transportation. The court discharged the other 38 alleged rebels. The evidence of the trials, which were conducted over several days, was based primarily on the testimony and statements of confessions by slaves involved in the plot, and when examined along with correspondence between officials and the Governor, there was no doubt that a plot indeed existed. The claim, though, of one the prisoners that the information he gave in an initial statement was fabricated in an attempt to receive leniency as promised by the defence attorney, brings into question the validity of the some of the statements given. There were however, questions about the seriousness of the threat and the conditions that led to it or more specifically who or what was to be blamed.<sup>91</sup>

The Presiding Judge in addressing the Grand Jury stated; "I have to notify you that the present Calendar is most appalling both as regards the number of the accused and the alleged enormity of crime - such a one as was never before seen in Tortola." In the Judge's opinion there was no question of the seriousness of the threat and he expressed the view that the press in the mother country was entirely to blame. There was the feeling that information about the debate on the issue of emancipation, which was taking place in England, was reaching the enslaved in the colony and influencing them

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<sup>90</sup> C.O.316/3 Minutes of the Virgin Islands House of Assembly 14 Sep. 1816.

<sup>91</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No.2 Calendar of persons committed for conspiracy.

negatively. In this regard, however, the fact that slaveholders in the colony were openly discussing and denouncing emancipation was overlooked by the judge.<sup>92</sup> Clearly, slaveholders in the British Caribbean and indeed the Virgin Islands were oblivious to the fact that the enslaved population was “alert to their surroundings and keenly interested in discussions about [their] fate.”<sup>93</sup>

By June 1831, in an attempt to put to rest a wide-spread rumour that emancipation was granted, a proclamation was issued by the King that the contrary was the case.<sup>94</sup> The proclamation was to be sent to all British Colonies where it was to be read to the slaves, but the records reveal that no such action was taken in the Virgin Islands until after the planned conspiracy was discovered in September 1831. Such a blunder on the part of the officials in the Virgin Islands shows that they underestimated the interest of the enslaved in the issues relating to emancipation, and that the rumour of freedom being granted but withheld was of great concern to them.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, in the absence of an official clarification with respect to the issue of freedom, the enslaved in the colony decided to take matters into their own hands. Several of the prisoners confessed that discussion about the uprising started sometime in March that year when an enslaved man, Joseph Long, told them that papers declaring the enslaved free were received in the colony but the slaveholders would not agree to it. Long was, as a result, in the process of recruiting men to go and fight for their freedom. Messages were sent around the island inviting six men from every estate to attend a meeting at Pasea Hall Estate to plan the uprising. It was said that in total, about 200 men had agreed to take part and Long was designated as captain in charge of the troops. The plan

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<sup>92</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No.3, Presiding Judge’s Report.

<sup>93</sup> Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 202.

<sup>94</sup> Carton, “Proto-Peasant Revolts?”, 109.

<sup>95</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 5 October 1831.

was that on the night of the attack the gang was to be divided into three groups and stationed at three strategic points in the Town - at the two ends and in the middle. Gun powder was to be used to set fire to all the houses at the same time.<sup>96</sup>

However, before the plan could be implemented a series of revival services, which the slaves attended, were held in the Methodist chapel. Many of the slaves, including Jacob Long were converted to Christianity and, as a result, the idea of the uprising was dropped.<sup>97</sup> Slaves in Jamaica also experienced a similar spiritual awakening in 1831, but unlike the Virgin Islands, it helped to fuel that colony's slave revolt, which was led by some of the deacons in the Native Baptist church, the key figure being Sam Sharpe.<sup>98</sup> In the Virgin Islands, after the revival was over it was another rumour of freedom denied which revived the original plans for an uprising, this time led by other enslaved individuals who were involved in the original plot.<sup>99</sup>

The source of the rumour was traced back to Saturday, 3 September 1831, when the Deputy Provost Marshal, Woodcock, by the beating of a drum made a public proclamation that all free blacks and coloureds in the colony were entitled to all rights and privileges enjoyed by white inhabitants in the colony. News of the proclamation spread throughout the island of Tortola creating much excitement among the enslaved population where it was concluded that their freedom was also intended but withheld. At the trial several slaves testified that they were told that the papers for their freedom, of which they had heard about early that year, had arrived in the colony along with the proclamation about the free blacks, but the slave owners had objected.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No. 3 & 4, Testimony of Thomas Caines, Statements of confession by Jacob Kienney, Andra Fahie and McDaniel.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Rekord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion," 108-125; Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 148- 178.

<sup>99</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 Nov. 1831, Enclosure No.3 & 4.

<sup>100</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 Nov. 1831.

Thus, messages were sent around the island alerting everyone that they would meet as was earlier planned to fight for their freedom. Leaders of the plot, animated with a deep understanding of the feeling held by the enslaved, reminded their fellow conspirators that freedom was their right and that the only way they would get it was if they fought for it. When asked if he would join the plot, Valentine, a 38 year old slave, answered in the affirmative stating that since he was a child he had heard that they were free and that the white people had cheated them out of it.<sup>101</sup> The slaves who expressed objection were threatened and told that if they did not participate they would be dealt with afterwards.<sup>102</sup> One witness, Jack Cook, a 51 year old night watchman, told the court that he was so uneasy about the threats that Nelson (one of the leaders of the conspiracy) made to him, that on the Sunday night of the postponed uprising he did not go to work.<sup>103</sup>

The agreed leader or Captain of the uprising was Shelly Martin, a 33 year old enslaved man, who otherwise held a position of authority. He was well known throughout the island and was well respected by both slave and free people. In sentencing Shelly, the Judge told him that of him “ other and better things have been expected - placed in a situation of confidence and trust by your master – enjoying privileges of a very extensive nature, possessing property to a large amount – surrounded in fact with comforts which many a free man might envy.” It is likely that Shelly was an overseer on the Joes Hill Estate as during the final decades of slavery in the Virgin Islands several slaves were appointed to such positions of authority. At the trial, the manager of the Estate, Charles Hart, in testifying to Shelly’s good character, stated that with regards

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<sup>101</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No.4.Confession of MacDaniel

<sup>102</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No 4. Testimony of Moses a Slave belonging to the Great Carrot Bay Estate.

<sup>103</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich , 19 November 1831, Enclosure No 4. Testimony of Jack Cook.



to his work “he had a great command over the other Negroes.” While finding Shelly guilty for his involvement in the plot, the jury also recommended mercy. This may have influenced the judge to sentence him to transportation rather than to being hanged. Thomas Caines, who had turned state witness, was described as a smart fellow who was known all over the country as a very good mechanic.<sup>104</sup>

Another fact exposed by the trial was the extent of freedom enjoyed by slaves to move around the island. This was recognised by the Judge when sentencing Nelson Martin, from the Joes Hill Estate. The Judge stated that Nelson had been particularly active in raising the standard of the revolt and it appeared that, wherever he went and whosoever he spoke to, it was with the intent of promoting the rebellion. Nelson, who often served as a hunter on his estate with responsibility for tracking, catching and returning enslaved individuals who absented themselves from the estate, would have known the island very well, and no doubt had developed valuable contacts all over the colony.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, William Hetherington, a slave who served the overseer on the Johnson Ghut estate testified that early one Sunday morning before day break he met Nelson Martin and Pickwick, walking towards the residential section on the estate. William stated that Nelson told him that he had come to the estate to visit a lady friend. Another witness, Sue O’neal, an enslaved woman who lived in the Town, testified that Nelson had visited her house on Saturday and Sunday, and that on the Sunday while he was there, she overheard him speaking to several passers-by about what she realized later was the plot to revolt.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich , 19 November 1831, Enclosure No 6. The Judgement handed down by the Chief Justice, Testimony of Charles Heart.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No. 6, Testimony of William Hetherington and Sue Oneal.

The evidence from the trial shows that the enslaved used their free time to meet and discuss their plans for the uprising. Several enslaved individuals spoke about discussing the plot with colleagues when they were working on their provision grounds. In particular, on the Sunday when the uprising was scheduled to take place, the leaders used the movement of enslaved individuals to and from the market to send messages all over the island of Tortola. Moses, a slave from the Great Carrot Bay estate, told the court that on that Sunday morning when he came into Town he was given a message to deliver to the people at West End and also to his brother, that they must come that night to Town and meet at the plum tree. Moses said that he was told that if they did not come it would be “hell play between black and black.” Moses further stated that he personally delivered the message to several of the estates on the West End of the island and accompanied another individual who had delivered messages to Shelly Martin, the Captain of the troops.<sup>107</sup>

There seems to have been no doubt in the minds of the enslaved population that their numerical strength over the white population could be used to their advantage. One of the organisers of the plot, Sam Fahie, was reported to have said that in the colony “the blacks were more than the whites and they could take the island from them.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed the white slave owners were quite aware that they were greatly outnumbered by the slave population. In 1829, there were 477 white people in the Virgin Islands. In the previous year 1828 the registered enslaved population was 5,743 or twelve times the number of whites.<sup>109</sup> In an attempt to remedy this situation, special legislation was introduced by the colony’s Legislature requiring the increase of the white population, but the fact that many of the sugar estates in the colony were owned by absentees militated against resolving the situation. James McQueen, an absentee planter who

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<sup>107</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No. 4, Testimony of Moses.

<sup>108</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No. 4, Testimony of Thomas Caines

<sup>109</sup> PP 1831 (260) Colonies: Population and Trade Returns .

owned six estates in the Virgin Islands, expressed dismay when in response to his constant complaint about the weakness of the legislative and judicial system in the colony, he was told by Colonial Office officials that the situation would have been better if more planters had chosen to reside in the colony.<sup>110</sup>

Like other conspirators in the region, the slaves in the Virgin Islands were motivated by the example of the Haitian revolution. Thomas Caine's testimony before the court revealed that he had collected information about the colours that were needed to construct a flag like the Haitian's. It is also evident that once all the white people were driven from the islands, the rebels' intention was to establish a free black state with the leaders of the uprising Shelly and Limerick Martin at its head. As a show of his authority, Shelly Martin is reported to have told the men that on the Sunday afternoon he would ride down to Town on a white horse to get an update about the plans from Sam Fahie. The conspirators intended to destroy all the possessions of all the white people: burning their homes, the cane fields and sugar works (buildings). Some of the conspirators however, expressed the view that even if they had taken the islands they might not have been able to keep them since Britain would send in war ships. In that case plans were being made for their escape to Haiti.<sup>111</sup>

After the uprising was put off on Sunday, 4 September for lack of numbers, messages were to be sent to the individual estates informing the people not to go out to work on Monday morning. While we cannot be certain of the extent to which the work stoppage was staged across the island, it was the refusal of the enslaved on the Brewers Bay

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<sup>110</sup> C.O.239/26 MacQueen to Goderich, 12 October 1831.

<sup>111</sup> C.O. 239/25 Maxwell to Goderich, 19 November 1831, Enclosure No. 4, Testimony of Thomas Caines & Moses, Confession of MacDaniel; Michael Craton, "Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies 1816-1832," *The Past and Present Society No.85* (1979), 99-125; Richard Sheridan, "From Jamaica Slavery to Haitian Freedom: the Case of the Black Crew of the Pilot Boat Deep Nine," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 67, No.4 (1982), 328-339; Bridget Brereton, *Resistance and Enslavement and Oppression in Trinidad, 1802-1849*; Gad Heuman, *'The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

estate to go out to work that led to the discovery of the plot. In her research on slaves' use of labour bargaining and strike action to achieve desired goals, Mary Turner concluded that "small-scale outbreaks may represent spontaneous reaction to the failure of mediation processes." The white slave owners were so quick to stamp out what they thought was a rebellion that they had fully overlooked the fact that the slaves probably wanted to air a grievance - the fact that they thought their freedom was being withheld.<sup>112</sup>

As was the case with several other colonies where serious plots were discovered in the eighteenth century (such as Antigua 1736, in Jamaica 1776), reduction in the white population, large numbers of the enslaved in positions of leadership, and lapses in security, all contributed to an environment that facilitated the development of collective resistance on the part of the enslaved.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, as with the response to other full-scale revolts in the region, the white ruling class responded with brutal force. All the organisers of the plot, with the exception of one who was sentenced to transportation, were sentenced to death. But in reviewing the case, the Governor felt there were extenuating circumstances that warranted a different response.<sup>114</sup>

The Governor was of the opinion that since the individuals had not committed any acts of violence and noting the fact that they were not in possession of any firearms (the majority of them were only armed with sticks), there were grounds for clemency. Such a position did not sit well with the local white slaveholders as they felt that the level of deceit displayed by the prisoners could not be over-looked. The slaveholders were

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<sup>112</sup> Mary Turner, "Chattel Slaves into Wage Slaves A Jamaican Case Study" in *From Chattel Slave to Wage Slave: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* ed. Mary Turner (Kingston: Ian Randle 1995), 45.

<sup>113</sup> David Barry Gaspar, "The Antigua Slave Conspiracy of 1736: A Case of the Origins of Collective Resistance," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third series, Vol. 35, No. 2* (1978), 308 – 323; Richard B. Sheridan, "The Jamaican Slave Insurrection Scare of 1776 and the American Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History, Vol. 61, No. 3* (1976), 290 – 308.

<sup>114</sup> Craton, "Proto-Peasant Revolts?";

adamant that the enslaved in the Virgin Islands were better off materially than others in the region and that they benefitted from a better relationship with their masters, who treated them more like ‘poor relations’ than as enslaved. Like the planter class in Barbados who were caught unawares by the 1816 revolt, the slaveholders in the Virgin Islands also felt that the “good treatment” of their enslaved workers should have ensured that they would not rise up against them.<sup>115</sup>

In support of his call for clemency, the Governor argued that the enslaved in their ignorance ‘had been led astray under a mistaken notion that their freedom had been withheld from them, and which had induced many of them to imagine, and endeavour to organise a plan to obtain by force this great blessing.’ Thus, after much discussion - following the submission of legal advice from all sides - Governor Maxwell in an attempt to uphold the rule of law in the colony, while recognising that the threat posed by the prisoners was not severe, commuted all the death sentences to transportation.<sup>116</sup>

## Summary

In an attempt to develop their autonomy, the enslaved in the Virgin Islands used varying forms of resistance to the institution of slavery. The high incidence of running away in the colony shows the extent to which the slaves registered their dissatisfaction with their status and sought freedom from their enslavement. In the final years before emancipation, as the number of runaways decreased, there were growing levels of adaptation to some aspects of the system of slavery on the part of the enslaved. Within the confines of slavery, the slaves were able to establish for themselves, opportunities to improve their wellbeing through a productive and successful internal market system,

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<sup>115</sup> C.O.239/25 Maxwell to Goderich 19 November 1831; Hilary Beckles and Karl Watson, “Social Protest and Labour Bargaining: The Changing Nature of Slaves’ Response to Plantation Life in Eighteenth-Century Barbados,” *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 8 (1987), 288-289.

<sup>116</sup> CO239/25 Maxwell to Goderich 19 November 1831.

supported and maintained through their provision grounds and pastures. Attempts, however, to utilize their numerical strength through a plot to take their freedom by force were not as successful but, in revealing the sense of freedom denied among sections of the enslaved population, underlined the determination of the enslaved as a whole to press their case for not only formal emancipation but improved personal autonomy beyond slavery. The following chapter will explore the reaction of the enslaved in the Virgin Islands to the concept of apprenticeship from 1834 onwards and how the slaves continued to exploit economic opportunities in their determination to achieve freedom.

## Chapter 5

### Apprenticeship

This chapter analyses the effects of the apprenticeship system on the Virgin Islands' slave society and the extent to which it retarded or facilitated the transition from slavery to freedom. An overview of the apprenticeship system and the demographic structure of the apprentice population is given. Further, the number of apprentices who exercised their rights to manumission and those who migrated will be looked at. Lastly, the range and level of resistance to the system exhibited by the apprentices will be analysed in detail.

In 1833, the British Parliament passed an Act abolishing slavery in all British colonies with effect from 1 August 1834. This historic decision was preceded by years of difficulties both in Britain and in the Caribbean. Mounting and renewed opposition to slavery among the British public and growing discontent among the slaves in the colonies were further intensified by a major slave revolt in Jamaica in 1831-1832. This had echoes, as we have seen, in the Virgin Islands. The brutal response of the Colonial Government in Jamaica brought condemnation from all sides and renewed interest in discussions about emancipation. Thus by early 1833, 'Emancipation had become a legislative certainty.' To quote Eric Williams, 'the alternative was clear: emancipation from above, or emancipation from below. But EMANCIPATION.'<sup>1</sup> The system of slavery had reached the end of its tether and the tides sweeping the region were gradually dislodging the moorings that held it in place. Thus a new day dawned.

This decision was taken with scepticism as there were deep-seated fears that emancipation would result in widespread destruction and civil unrest. After years of

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (The University of North Carolina Press 1944), 208.

oppression and servitude, the enslaved were not considered by some as ready for freedom. Besides, there was still the issue of the economy as there was a likelihood that the freed slaves would refuse to work for wages. In an attempt to bridge this divide – addressing the needs of the enslaved for freedom and the needs of the planters for security, especially with regards to the supply of labour - a period of apprenticeship was mandated. Thus the Abolition Act, which was intended to bring an end to slavery in the region, did not in any way confer on the enslaved the status normally associated with freedom. As the details of this new and questionable form of freedom (apprenticeship) became known, the enslaved voiced their opposition and renewed their commitment to attaining full freedom.<sup>2</sup>

In the Virgin Islands there were threats of unrest as the enslaved expressed their dissatisfaction to the proposed new system. Governor McGregor, visiting the colony on 24 July 1833, stated that: “A degree of uncertainty, rather than positive alarm, seemed to prevail respecting the intentions of the Negro population.” The colony was in a high state of alert with His Majesty’s Ship *Belvidera* anchored in Road Town. The local militia was armed and ready and it was made known that there were ships of war in the vicinity if needed. Further, the 67<sup>th</sup> West India regiment was stationed in the colony and there was a high state of readiness.<sup>3</sup>

In an attempt to defuse the growing tension with regards to the impending act of emancipation, the Methodist missionaries stationed in the Virgin Islands conducted a series of meetings and discussions with the enslaved. They travelled throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation The Sugar Colonies and The Great Experiment 1830-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976) pp124-125; Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom Race, Labour, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992); Douglas Hall, *Five of the Leewards 1834-1870 The problems of the Post-emancipation period in Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, Nevis and St Kitts* (Caribbean University Press Ginn and Company Limited, 1971), 15-38.

<sup>3</sup>PP1835 (278-11) Abolition of slavery Throughout the British Colonies Part II McGregor to Rice 1 August 1834, No. 237.



colony meeting with the gangs of workers on the different estates and made every effort to address the workers' dissatisfaction. A special address on becoming free and apprenticed was written by the missionaries and delivered to members of the Methodist society. As was common practice throughout the period of slavery, the missionaries did not offer their opinion on the new system but noted that their objective was to promote popular tranquillity.

That long-awaited day, Friday, 1 August 1834, was declared a public holiday and the enslaved gathered in mass numbers at the Methodist chapels. The largest chapel (with a capacity of 400), which was in Road Town, was 'full to over flowing' while at West End, Rev. Parkes 'preached to as many as could get into the chapel.' At East End, Rev. Hawkins stated that he preached to a very excellent congregation.<sup>4</sup> These services of thanksgiving gave the ex-slaves an opportunity to reflect on their journey from slavery to freedom, 'that is freedom from absolute bondage.' There was a festive atmosphere as the people who, the day before, were enslaved, praised and worshipped God with an 'expression of holy joy on their faces.' In reflecting on the day of emancipation and the immediate aftermath, William R. Isaac, the President of the Virgin Islands, informed Secretary of State Spring Rice that the day had "passed off very quietly... no unusual excitement was manifested ...all went back to their work under the new system on the following Monday morning." Isaac concluded his brief report by optimistically stating that he hoped that that state of things would continue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Methodist Missionary Society (MMS) West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Hawkins, 6 October, 1834; MMS West Indies Correspondence Fraser 30 September, 1834.

<sup>5</sup> Colonial Office (C.O.) 239 Isaac to Spring Rice August 1<sup>st</sup> 1834 No. 238; MMS West Indies Correspondence Fraser 30 September 1834.

## **The Apprenticeship System**

The enslaved in the Virgin Islands - as with their counterparts around the region - had eagerly awaited their emancipation but, because it was based on the imposition of the apprenticeship system, they had many questions about the type of freedom that was being granted to them. As subjects of the Crown, they could not conceive that the King would grant them freedom while at the same time demand free labour. This confusion forced the enslaved in the Virgin Islands to say: "Printice! The King say this? What we go printice for? People printice to learn something but nobody can teach us our work: we can dig cane hole or boil sugar or make sugar cask as well now as we ever shall." Clearly, in the minds of the enslaved there was no need for them to become apprentices as they were fully conversant with all aspects of the sugar production: planting the sugar cane, manufacturing the molasses, and preparing sugar for shipping. The level of dissension among the slaves was such that the President noted that 'The negroes yet remain pretty quiet but there is great murmuring abroad – indeed some few of them have openly avowed their determination to oppose the apprenticeship system, and which I fear will disseminate and create some serious work, when the period for their emancipation arrives.'<sup>6</sup>

In Jamaica, in the Parish of St Ann, a similar discourse took place between the slaves who were dissatisfied about the provisions of the apprenticeship system and declared their intention to strike. The workers questioned the origin of the Act, demanding to know if the King had, in fact, sanctioned it. There was a strong belief on their part that there was a local conspiracy to defraud them of the freedom that the King intended. According to Gad Heuman, the ex-slaves across the British Caribbean were convinced

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<sup>6</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence , Tortola, Edward Frazer 30 June, 1834; C.O. 239/38McQueen to Glenelg 18 June 1834.

that there was something logically wrong with the concept of apprenticeship in relation to emancipation.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of widespread disorder, notwithstanding strike action staged by workers in St. Kitts, Trinidad and Jamaica, seemed to mask deeper feelings of dissatisfaction among apprenticed workers in the region. Their efforts to adjust to the new system were mistaken for acceptance and created a false sense of security. Furthermore, the optimism that the President of the Virgin Islands observed was also reflected by other officials across the British Caribbean. For example, in St Vincent, two days after the system was instituted, Lieutenant Governor Tyler reported that a successful transition had taken place. While he recognised that the ex-slaves were somewhat confused by the use of the term freedom to describe their new status, he said that there was acceptance of the new system of labour. About two weeks later, however, Tyler was forced to re-assess the situation as a “spirit of insubordination” became evident.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas C. Holt argues that the optimism about the implementation of the apprenticeship system in its early stages was as ill-conceived as the whole system of apprenticeship itself. Holt posits that it was almost impossible for the former slaves to understand or appreciate their new role as apprentices because of its ambiguous nature. While purporting that the slaves were free, the system then proceeded to reiterate the same philosophies and processes on which slavery existed for decades. In essence nothing changed for the better, but as the apprentices soon realized things could change for the worse.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Swithin Wilmot, “Not ‘Full Free’: The Ex-Slaves and the Apprenticeship System in Jamaica 1834-1838” *Jamaica Journal*, Vol.17, No. (1984), 2-10; Gad Heuman, *The Caribbean* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 96-98.

<sup>8</sup> Edward L. Cox, “From Slavery to Freedom: Emancipation and Apprenticeship in Grenada and St. Vincent, 1834-1834,” in *Crossing Boundaries Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 371-372

<sup>9</sup> Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 56; Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British: Empire from Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2007), 194-197.

The apprenticeship system was heavily biased in favour of the former masters, who were expected by law to provide all the customary allowances (food, clothes, housing and medical care) and privileges to their apprentices as was done during slavery. The planters were also entitled to 45 hours of free labour, but beyond that they were expected to pay wages. With regards to those wages it was the planter, not the enslaved, who determined what should be paid. However, as some level of negotiation was expected to take place, the apprentices at least had a right to refuse if they were not satisfied with what was being offered. This matter was made more complicated by the fact that even the planters could not agree on what might have been considered a reasonable rate of pay. It was these opportunities to work for a wage that the creators of the apprenticeship system hoped would foster in the apprentices the discipline of working for wages. On the surface, this seemed quite plausible, but considering the extensive internal market the enslaved in the region had developed before 1834, they were quite capable of working to meet their financial needs.<sup>10</sup>

The key provision on which the success of apprenticeship hinged was the stipendiary magistrates. These individuals were unconnected with the West Indies; they were appointed in Britain and sent out to the colonies with the main responsibility of mediating this new and critical form of freedom. In short, they had to ensure adherence to the provisions of the apprenticeship system. William A. Green, in analysing the process of emancipation in the British Caribbean, was of the view that “the concept of the stipendiary magistrate was sensible and uncomplicated.” He argued that there was no other avenue through which the system could have been implemented. Thus, across

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<sup>10</sup> Holt, *The problem of Freedom*, 68.

the entire British Caribbean during the apprenticeship period, the special magistrates assumed authority over the workers.<sup>11</sup>

The apprentices were encouraged to report their problems to magistrates and to be governed by their rulings, which were not always in their favour. This external intervention in the traditional relationship between planters and their workers was not welcomed by the former, as previously they had full authority over their workers (who were considered their property) without interference from anyone. In this regard, the planters had to be reminded that they were not allowed to administer any form of punishment to their apprentices that was not sanctioned by the special magistrates. Special Magistrate, Colthurst, in Barbados noted that it took him some six to eight months or more to convince the planters in his jurisdiction to desist from administering any form of punishment to apprentices. In essence then, the role of the special magistrates was to protect the apprentices from maltreatment, abuse and overwork, while at the same time ensuring that they worked judiciously for their masters.<sup>12</sup>

The special magistrates were involved to some extent administratively in the management of the daily affairs of the apprentices and their masters - arbitrating disputes between both parties and generally ensuring the proper functioning of the apprenticeship system. Where there were breaches, sanctions were taken - which in the case of the apprentices sometimes meant punishment, including whippings. On the other hand, where the planters or former masters were found to be in violation of the Act they were fined and reprimanded. One magistrate, in evaluating his role, concluded that it

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<sup>11</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Holt, *The Problem of freedom*, 57-58; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 136-137; Roderick A. McDonald, *Between Slavery and Freedom: Special Magistrate John Anderson's Journal of St Vincent During Apprenticeship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 4; Woodville Marshall, ed. *The Colthurst Journal: Journal of a Special Magistrate in the Island of Barbados and St Vincent July 1835-September 1838*. (New York: KTO Press, 1977), 71.

was a difficult task, which involved balancing the rights of both the apprentices and the planters.<sup>13</sup>

The success in the management of the apprenticeship system was heavily dependent on the extent to which the special Magistrates remained objective and impartial in their dealing with the apprentices and their former masters. In particular, with regards to their dealing with the planters, Magistrates had to be careful not to give the impression that they were on friendly terms with them as that could have jeopardised their credibility in dealing with cases. The Magistrate, John B. Colthurst, who served in Barbados and St Vincent, said that he only dealt with the planters in an official capacity when he enlisted their cooperation in carrying out his duties. Socially, he said that he avoided their company. On the other hand, Magistrate Anderson who served in St Vincent developed a reputation of aligning himself with the interest of the planters; this was an action, which to all indications undermined his credibility as a magistrate.<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of the apprenticeship period, less than half of the appointed magistrates arrived in the Caribbean. In several islands - St Lucia, Bahamas, Nevis, Montserrat, Tobago and the Virgin Islands - no magistrate was present when the apprenticeship system commenced.<sup>15</sup> William Gordon, who received his appointment as a Stipendiary Magistrate 16 June, 1834 and was assigned to the Virgin Islands, did not arrive in the colony until 30 August, 1834.<sup>16</sup> In the interim, prior to Gordon's arrival in the Virgin Islands, three local men, Wilson Lawson, a member of Council of the Virgin Islands, Thomas Marsh, Speaker of the House of Assembly, and George W. Lewes were appointed to act as Special Magistrates, with responsibility for the implementation of

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<sup>13</sup> Marshall, ed. *The Colthurst Journal*, 8-31.

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, 17, 27; Marshall, ed. *The Colthurst Journal*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 137; Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> C.O.239/43 Light to Glenelg 5 Dec. 1836, No. 52.

the apprenticeship system. Considering the connection of these men with the local planters and the fact that they might have also been slaveholders, the system got off to a rocky start with no visible signs of change.<sup>17</sup>

During the month of August 1834, while the apprenticeship system was in its infancy, the Methodist missionaries noted that the situation in the colony was such that disturbances were highly likely. The missionaries observed that managers on some of the estates were treating the apprentices inhumanely. To all indications, the presence of temporary magistrates did not help to defuse the tension, but the arrival and intervention of William Gordon put the system back on track.<sup>18</sup> One of the first matters the missionaries brought to Gordon's attention, in a meeting on 4 September 1834, was the distressed state of the apprentices who were confined to prison by the temporary magistrates. These individuals were in essence starving because prison officials did not have any means to provide them with subsistence and, it appeared, their former masters did not take an active interest in their welfare. The Missionary, Edward Fraser, noted in his journal that Gordon had taken the case in hand.<sup>19</sup>

When Gordon arrived in the Virgin Islands, the commission of the three men who initially acted as Special Magistrates was withdrawn. This decision was taken because the men were not prepared to continue serving without remuneration. Their absence, however, was not seen as a great loss for it was thought that, notwithstanding the number of islands comprising the colony, the work required could be adequately carried out by one magistrate. This was the conclusion of the President of the Colony who initially felt that two additional magistrates were needed to ensure the proper

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<sup>17</sup>PP1836(166-1) (166-11) Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Colonies, Part III, MacGregor to Glenelg 17 Aug. 1835, No. 353.

<sup>18</sup>MMS West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Edwards 30 September 1834 & Hawkins, 6 Oct. 1834.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

administration of the apprenticeship system in the Virgin Islands. However, after close to a year of the system's operation, President Isaac was confident of Gordon's ability to continue managing the system on his own.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Apprenticeship Population**

In 1834 - after the completion of the tri-annual registration of slaves in the Virgin Islands, which was done between 3 February and 1 March - there was an estimated total population of 5,731 slaves in the colony.<sup>21</sup> To determine this figure, each slave was followed throughout all six registers beginning in 1818, noting changes in their status including deaths, runaways and manumissions. New names added to the register as a result of births, returned fugitives and correction of oversights were also taken into consideration. While this figure and the accompanying demographic information outlined below is not presented as a wholly precise count of the slave population in the Virgin Islands at the close of slavery, it is by far the best figure we have and provides a unique opportunity to profile the apprentice population in the colony at the start of the apprenticeship.

Firstly, at the eve of emancipation the number of female slaves in the colony continued to be higher than males. In fact as was the case in 1818, 53 per cent of the slave population were females. This consistent ratio in favour of females occurred despite a higher manumission rate for females, the influence of which on the slave sex ratio was probably offset to some extent by higher runaway rates among males over the period 1818-1834. When we look at the age profile of the slaves, it is evident that those within the most active and productive age group, aged 15-44 years, comprised just over 45 per

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<sup>20</sup> PP 1836(166-1) (166-11) Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Colonies, Part III MacGregor to Glenelg No. 353.

<sup>21</sup> Treasury Record (T) 71/375 Virgin Islands Slave Register 1834.



cent of the slave population in 1834. Again, females outnumbered males in this core working group (Table 5.1)

**Table 5.1** Distribution of the Virgin Islands' Slave Population in 1834 by Percentage.

Age	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	5.43	4.89	<b>10.31</b>
<b>5-9</b>	5.06	4.76	<b>9.82</b>
<b>10-14</b>	5.79	6.56	<b>12.35</b>
<b>15-19</b>	4.12	4.22	<b>8.34</b>
<b>20-24</b>	4.73	4.83	<b>9.56</b>
<b>25-29</b>	4.50	4.38	<b>8.88</b>
<b>30-34</b>	3.39	3.73	<b>7.12</b>
<b>35-39</b>	2.83	2.69	<b>5.51</b>
<b>40-44</b>	2.91	4.50	<b>7.42</b>
<b>45-49</b>	2.11	3.25	<b>5.36</b>
<b>50-54</b>	2.08	2.69	<b>4.76</b>
<b>55-59</b>	1.48	2.32	<b>3.80</b>
<b>60-64</b>	0.89	1.62	<b>2.51</b>
<b>65-69</b>	0.68	1.27	<b>1.95</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.37	0.99	<b>1.36</b>
<b>75+</b>	0.37	0.56	<b>0.92</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>46.73</b>	<b>53.27</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Slave Database

Children under the age of 14 years accounted for just over 32 per cent of the total slave population in the Virgin Islands. More specifically, those six years and under who were made completely free on 1 August 1834 were about 13 per cent of the slave population (Table 5.1). On three unnamed estates, some assistance and care was provided for these children but in other cases they were entirely supported by their parents. Where mothers were unable to care for their very young children, the law made provision for them to be indentured to the estate on which they lived. However, there seems to be no indication that in the Virgin Islands this option was taken. Parents were against the idea of their

children working in the fields.<sup>22</sup> This was also the position of parents in general across the British Caribbean who equated apprenticing their children to selling them into slavery, which they vowed they would never do. In some cases mothers declared that they would rather see their children die than put them in bondage.<sup>23</sup>

The main provision for the education of children was the Sunday schools that were established and administered by the Methodist missionaries in the Virgin Islands. At the church in West End, Tortola, after emancipation 100 people came to Sunday school, whereas the usual number before 1834 had been 30.<sup>24</sup> In Road Town, the number of students attending the Sunday school was so great that a vacant building next to the church had to be borrowed to make room for them. By the end of August 1837, Rev. Hawkins reported to Magistrate Gordon that a total of 513 children, 72 per cent of whom were girls, attended the three Sunday schools (Road Town, West End and East End) run by the Methodist mission. Additionally, 185 adults (comprising 41 men and 144 women) also attended the Sunday schools and there was an average daily attendance of between 50 and 60 at the day school in Road Town. What is not known is the extent to which these numbers were affected by the passing of a hurricane on 2 August 1837, which damaged the chapel in Road Town and completely destroyed the chapels in West End and East End.<sup>25</sup> The fact that females, whether adult or children, greatly outnumbered males in Sunday school attendance at Methodist chapels is striking and speaks to a value that was attached to education by the ex-slaves.

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<sup>22</sup> C.O. 239/45 Light to Glenelg, 14 March, 1837, No. 123.

<sup>23</sup> Bridget Brereton, "Family Strategies, Gender, and the Shift to Wage labour in the British Caribbean" in *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, ed. Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, (London: Duke University Press 2005), 144-145; William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Fraser 30 Sept. 1834.

<sup>25</sup> C.O.239/47 Special Magistrate (S.M.) Report 30 Aug.1837.

Slaves aged 50 years and older made up about 15 per cent of the slave population in the Virgin Islands at the time of the 1834 slave registration. Not all of these slaves, who were viewed as old, were able to continue as productive workers in the plantation economy. Hence, the Abolition Act made provision for those slaves who, as a result of age and infirmity were no longer ‘useful’ economically, to be emancipated immediately. According to the compensation claims submitted by slave owners in the Virgin Islands in 1834, two per cent of the total slave population was categorized as aged and infirmed were set free on 1 August 1834. After taking into consideration those slaves who were exempted from service under the apprenticeship system, some 4,871 slaves in the Virgin Islands made the initial ‘transition’ from slavery to the apprenticeship system (Table 5.1).<sup>26</sup>

In 1834, the population on the Cays was 1,460 and on Tortola 4,269. When compared to the population distribution in 1818, there was a slight increase in the percentage of the slave population living on the Cays. In 1818 the percentage of the slave population living on the Cays was 23 per cent of the total population, and in 1834 the figure stood at 25 per cent. Conversely, the percentage of the slave population living on Tortola reduced from 77 per cent in 1818 to 75 per cent in 1834. Here again, the shift in distribution of the slave population in favour of the Cays occurred despite the fact that this group of islands experienced a higher rate of manumissions during the period 1818-1834 (See Chapter 3). This reflected perhaps higher birth rates or survival rates on the Cays, but also higher rates of runaways on Tortola. (Table 5.2)

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<sup>26</sup> T71/374 Virgin Islands Slave Register, 1834.

**Table 5.2** Percentage Distribution of Slaves on Tortola and the Cays 1834

Age	Tortola			The Cays		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
<b>0-4</b>	10.87	8.21	<b>9.44</b>	13.71	12.11	<b>12.88</b>
<b>5-9</b>	9.91	8.21	<b>9.00</b>	13.43	11.05	<b>12.19</b>
<b>10-14</b>	11.22	11.13	<b>11.17</b>	15.71	15.79	<b>15.75</b>
<b>15-19</b>	8.85	7.03	<b>7.87</b>	8.71	10.66	<b>9.73</b>
<b>20-24</b>	10.72	9.78	<b>10.21</b>	8.43	6.97	<b>7.67</b>
<b>25-29</b>	9.71	8.64	<b>9.14</b>	9.43	6.97	<b>8.15</b>
<b>30-34</b>	7.79	7.11	<b>7.43</b>	5.71	6.71	<b>6.23</b>
<b>35-39</b>	6.07	4.76	<b>5.36</b>	6.00	5.92	<b>5.96</b>
<b>40-44</b>	6.72	9.30	<b>8.10</b>	4.86	5.92	<b>5.41</b>
<b>45-49</b>	4.80	6.72	<b>5.83</b>	3.71	4.21	<b>3.97</b>
<b>50-54</b>	4.90	5.24	<b>5.08</b>	3.14	4.47	<b>3.84</b>
<b>55-59</b>	3.08	4.71	<b>3.96</b>	3.43	3.29	<b>3.36</b>
<b>60-64</b>	2.17	3.36	<b>2.81</b>	1.14	2.11	<b>1.64</b>
<b>65-69</b>	1.47	2.62	<b>2.08</b>	1.43	1.71	<b>1.58</b>
<b>70-74</b>	0.96	1.92	<b>1.48</b>	0.29	1.71	<b>1.03</b>
<b>75+</b>	0.76	1.27	<b>1.03</b>	0.86	0.39	<b>0.62</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: The Virgin Islands Database

When the slave populations on the Cays and on Tortola for the year 1834 are compared, a clear difference in the structure of the two groups emerges. Firstly, the slave population on the Cays was generally younger than the slave population on Tortola. For example, while slaves aged 50 and above made up about 12 per cent of the total slave population on the Cays, on Tortola the same group accounted for just over 16 per cent of the population. Additionally, while the number of children under the age of 14 on Tortola made up 30 per cent of the island's slave population, on the Cays the figure was as high as 40 per cent. With these differences at the two ends of the age spectrum, it is not surprising that on Tortola slaves within the age group 15-49 amounted to 53.6 per cent of the slave population but only represented 47.9 per cent on the Cays. Table 5.2 also reveals that on the Cays 47 per cent of both the female and male slaves fell in the

age range 15-49 years, whereas on Tortola, 55 per cent of the male slaves fell in age group 15-49 and 53 per cent of the females did so (Table 5.2).

Earlier in this chapter it was estimated that about 20 per cent of the apprenticed labourers in the Virgin Islands lived on the Cays. After almost a year in the job, Magistrate Gordon confessed that he had not visited any of the Cays as he did not have the means to secure access to a boat. Recognising the need for the magistrate to be able to visit all parts of the colony, the President of the colony requested that the secretary of state authorise an additional allowance for hiring a boat. Lord Glenelg pointed out that the allowance already given was considered sufficient to cover house-rent, as well as horse and boat hire. As a result, as none of the reports submitted by Gordon reflected the situation of the apprentice labourers on the Cays, it is highly unlikely that he made regular visits to them. To enable us to get a snapshot of the life of the apprenticed labourers on the Cays, we turn to a general report written by Henry Light, Lt. Governor of the Leeward Islands, who visited the Colony in 1837 and stayed for an extensive period.<sup>27</sup>

Light observed that former slave owners or masters had very little, if any, control over the apprenticed labourers in the Cays. This situation had developed, he believed, because the masters had no means to support the apprentices and as a result they were entirely responsible for their own subsistence. On several of the Cays, including Jost Van Dyke and Spanish Town (Virgin Gorda), Light found that the apprentices survived by engaging in activities such as fishing, cutting wood, burning lime and trading with the neighbouring island of St Thomas. Generally, he was of the opinion that conditions on the Cays were getting worse daily but that they could be remedied if some of the

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<sup>27</sup> C.O. 239/40 MacGregor to Glenelg 17 Aug. 1835, No. 353.

apprenticed labourers were allowed to be removed to Tortola, where he was certain the estates would gladly receive them. The conditions referred to, however, had less to do with the apprentices and related more to the creole white population, who, Light found, were worse off than any other group because they did not have the “energy or means to better their condition.”<sup>28</sup>

Light’s recommendation for relocating former slaves was seen also as an opportunity to provide financial relief for the former slave owners on the Cays, most notably because they would have been able to sell their rights in apprentice labour. Even though a condition for such a move would have required the concurrence of the apprentices, the fact remained that any such arrangement would have been illegal. The Colonial Act number 90, Clause 90 passed by the Virgin Island Legislature in April 1834, which made provision for the removal of apprentices by the one Special Magistrate, was disallowed by the Secretary of State and was subsequently repealed. Given that the original Act required that such a decision could only be taken by two special magistrates, Lord Glenelg concluded that the situation in the Virgin Islands meant that the apprentices were irremovable.<sup>29</sup>

### **Maximizing the Labour Force**

As the death bell tolled on slavery in the region, the apprenticeship system offered the planters the reprieve they so desperately craved. As the date of emancipation loomed and the uncertainty of the apprenticeship system was contemplated, planters made a last-ditch attempt to extract the greatest amount of profit possible while working the enslaved to the limit. Without consideration for the next crop, as much sugar cane as possible, even that which was not yet ripe, was harvested. The goal was to manufacture

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<sup>28</sup> C.O.239/45 Light to Glenelg 14 March 1837

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

as much sugar as was technically possible. In the Virgin Islands, as was the case across the region, the output of sugar for the year 1834 (21,936 Cwt) far exceeded the output for the previous year 1833 (14,969 Cwt) and the following year 1835 (13,831 Cwt).<sup>30</sup> While the planters' strategy seemingly worked with regards to the August implementation of abolition, the figures above point towards a problem in mobilizing labour after 1834.

As a part of the apprenticeship system, all the labourers in the region were divided into two main categories, agricultural and non-agricultural workers. This categorization was to facilitate further administration of the system, as the term of apprenticeship was to be determined based on the specific category. The agricultural workers were to serve a period of six years terminating in 1840, while the non-agricultural workers were indentured for four years with a release date of 1 August 1838. Generally, the goal of the proponents of the apprenticeship system was to provide a period of transition for the labourers during which time their transition, economically and socially, to full freedom would be facilitated. More specifically it was an opportunity to help the labourers to become accustomed to the concept of working for wages. To all indication, however, the former slave owners did not subscribe to the official view, as they seemed to regard apprenticeship as their final opportunity to get the last bit of unwaged labour, which they felt was rightfully theirs, before full freedom was instituted.<sup>31</sup>

Apprenticeship meant different things to those who were involved in its implementation. The planters clearly viewed the period of compulsory labour as part of their compensation for the pending loss of the labour of the individuals they considered

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<sup>30</sup> Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship*, 272; D.G. Hall, "The Apprenticeship period in Jamaica 1834-1838," *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1953), 142; PP1842 (293) West India Produce 1831-1841 (1842), 93; Hall, Jamaica, 147.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, "The Apprenticeship Period," 148-150; Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship*, 270.

their property. Thus as was the case in the year prior to apprenticeship, planters continued to extract as much labour and profit as possible. In this thrust to maximize earnings from their labour force, measures were instituted to cut expenditure and increase profit. Allowances that were not legally mandated were withdrawn. For example, nurses were no longer provided to look after infant children while their mothers worked in the field and field cooks and water carriers were also withdrawn. To make matters worse, mothers were prevented from nursing children in the field and there was also a ban on individuals carrying their own water into the field. Further, some individuals, such as women who had given birth to six or more children and the elderly who were exempted from field labourer, were reassigned back into the fields.<sup>32</sup>

Under the system of apprenticeship, planters and slave owners were guaranteed 45 and one half hours of unpaid labour from their former slaves for at least four years. Additional work or overtime, however, had to be negotiated and paid for, in a way creating a dual working relationship - for 45 and a half hours a week it resembled the master-slave relationship and during any additional hours it became an employer-employee relationship. Apprenticeship was considered a 'period of adjustment, a time of learning for masters and for ex-slaves, in which both parties would accustom themselves to the new relationship of freedom and search out ways towards mutual trust and accommodation.' Additionally, based on the premise that the enslaved were not ready for freedom, the period of apprenticeship was seen as an opportunity to prepare them for their new roles as citizens.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas Hall, *Five Leewards*, 24; Hueman, *The Caribbean*, 96-99; Wilmot, "Not 'Full Free'", 8; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 132.

<sup>33</sup> Hall, *Five Leewards*, 26.



In the Virgin Islands the regular work-week for apprentices, outside of crop time, was five days from Monday to Friday, 6 am to 6 pm, with three-hour breaks in the middle of the day. On some estates though, apprentices chose to work from 6 am to 3.30 pm with half an hour break in between. During crop time, however, when the workers were involved in the manufacture of sugar, they were required to work additional hours for which they were paid 1d sterling per hour. Across the Caribbean this system caused many problems as the apprentices ‘guarded closely the labour time that was in their control.’<sup>34</sup> The Special Magistrate in the Virgin Islands, William Gordon, reported that the apprentices in the colony readily undertook extra work without compulsion, but there was a distinct possibility that there were other issues at stake of which Gordon was unaware. This was borne out in information presented by the missionaries in the colony.<sup>35</sup>

Very early during the first year of implementation of the apprenticeship system in the Virgin Islands, the Methodist Missionaries wrote that the apprentices felt compelled to work the extra hours, as objecting might have resulted in them being deprived of privileges such as being able to keep livestock on their masters property. This perception on the part of the apprentices was not ill-placed, as provisions in the Act which outlined the duties of apprentices stated that they needed written permission from estate owners to allow them to keep animals (cattle, goats, pigs etc.) on the property. The law also authorised landowners to regulate the number and type of animals the apprentices were allowed to keep on their property. This provision in the local Act was

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<sup>34</sup> W. K. Marshall, “Apprenticeship and Labour Relations in the Four Windward Islands” in *Abolition and its Aftermath The Historical Context 1790-1916*, ed. David Richardson (London: Frank Cass, 1985) p.211

<sup>35</sup> C.O. 239/47 S. M. Report August, 1837

later disallowed as it was felt that it would 'give rise to continual vexation and do little or no good.'<sup>36</sup>

As was established in Chapter 4, the enslaved in the Virgin Islands depended greatly on their provision grounds for subsistence and clearly after emancipation this reliance continued or may have even increased. As there were reduced opportunities for paid labour, the provision grounds were the lifeline of the apprentice labourers. Notwithstanding the uncertainties of the weather, constant attention and care were needed in the cultivation of provisions, the keeping of livestock, and the marketing of produce. The apprenticeship period thus provided an opportunity for the planters to try and gain control of the economic ventures of the apprentices with a view towards making them totally dependent on the estate for their survival. That attempt, however, was thwarted.<sup>37</sup>

In his report, dated 30 August 1837, Magistrate Gordon highlighted the fact that apprentices took advantage of the large amount of land that had been made available to them to plant provisions and keep livestock.<sup>38</sup> One Caribbean historian was of the view that given the attention and care that apprentices put into their provision grounds, they were in a position to support themselves almost entirely by that means. In a sense, it seems as if the apprentices were simply waiting for the apprenticeship period to end so they could withdraw themselves from the estates.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Fraser 2 March, 1835; PP1835 (278-11) Papers Presented to Parliament, Abolition Slavery, Part II, Glenelg to McGregor 28 July 1835, No. 240 (1835), 134;

<sup>37</sup> C.O.239/47 S.M. Report 30 Aug 1837.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Burns, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship*, 271.

## Manumissions and Migrations

During the final decades of slavery, the crown colonies in the British Caribbean like Trinidad and Guyana, were the only British colonies with provision in place for compulsory manumission, where the slave master could not object to slaves purchasing their freedom. With the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the apprenticeship system, legal provision was made for access to manumission across the entire British Caribbean. Under the apprenticeship system apprentices were entitled to seek manumission by purchasing the ‘unexpired term of their apprenticeship.’ In spite of the legal provision, William Green and other researchers have argued that the former masters frustrated the process by setting excessively high valuations on their apprentices. It was also observed by Green, that the issue of manumission was valued differently in different colonies in the region, as some apprentices seem to prefer to hold on to their savings for the purpose of establishing themselves after full freedom was granted.<sup>40</sup>

Several of the early reports submitted by Magistrate Gordon on the condition of the apprentice labourers in the Virgin Islands, stressed that there was not a general desire among the apprentices to purchase their discharge. This is not surprising, as during the final years before emancipation the number of manumissions in the colony fell from 36 per annum in the period 1825 -1828 to about 22 per annum period 1831-1834 (See Chapter 3). During the first year of the apprenticeship system, only 11 apprentice labourers purchased their freedom paying a range of prices from £20 to £80.10s. Thus we see a decline of about 50 per cent in the annual number of manumissions in the colony during the first year of the apprenticeship system, a finding which seems to confirm the fact that the apprentices were waiting for the freedom to which they

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<sup>40</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 132-134; Wilmot, "Not 'Full Free,' 8; Burns, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship*, 276, 279; Hall, "The Apprenticeship Period," 148-150; Verene Shepherd, "The Apprenticeship Experience on Jamaican Livestock Pens 1834-1838," *Jamaica Journal*, Vol.22, No. 1 (1989), 49.

believed they were entitled. Further analysis of the records, however, indicates that there were other mitigating factors, as sections 8 and 10 of Act no. 37 which became law in the Virgin Islands on 19 July 1834 placed restrictions on manumissions, disqualifying individuals who were previously convicted of certain crimes, including larceny and harbouring runaways. Individuals who absented themselves from their masters, or ran away, were also barred from accessing the privilege of manumission. Secretary of State Glenelg, who disallowed the measure in July 1835, causing the clauses to be repealed, was of the opinion that the right of the apprentices to purchase a discharge was ‘unfettered by any such restrictions.’ Thus we can conclude that during the period August 1834 to July 1835 apprenticeship labourers did not have free and fair access to manumission even if it was their expressed desire.<sup>41</sup> This suggestion is consistent with findings by Marshall, who found that few apprentices in the Windward Islands took advantage of the provision to purchase their freedom in the first year of apprenticeship. However, in subsequent years there was a marked increase in spite of the high cost that was set by owners.<sup>42</sup>

In the second year of the apprenticeship, the situation in the Virgin Islands started to change as it was reported that the labourers in the colony were being enticed by agents from Demerara. One absentee estate owner appealed to the Colonial Office to put measures in place to prevent the activities of speculators and protect the interest of the planters in the colony. Foreign agents were said to have been paying for the “unexpired term of the most effective apprentices and taking them away as articulated servants.” This problem was being experienced in the other Leeward Islands colonies, though in Montserrat it was the slave owners who were selling their apprentices illegally to the speculators and agents from Demerara. In the Virgin Islands, however, the availability

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<sup>41</sup> PP1836(166-1) (166-11) Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Colonies Part III MacGregor to Glenelg 25 Aug. 1835, No.355 Enclosure No.3

<sup>42</sup> Marshall, Apprenticeship and Labourer Relations, p213

of such prospects placed a much greater value on the apprentices' labour and enhanced their ability to make choices. From the planters' perspective, such interference by outsiders was causing their labourers to be critical about their working conditions and encouraging them to hold out for improvements. One estate manager reported that in an attempt hold on to his workers he had increased wages for extra time from 1d an hour to 1s for ten hours of work.<sup>43</sup>

While it is highly probable that the planters over-exaggerated the number of apprenticed labourers whose freedom was paid for by speculators from Demerara, Magistrate Gordon reported that the majority of the labourers who obtained their discharge emigrated to Demerara.<sup>44</sup> Records reflecting the registration of indentured workers in Demerara for the period 1834 to 1838 show that there were 123 individuals in that colony from the Virgin Islands. Demographically, 76 per cent were male and they fell between the ages of 16 and 53 years. The oldest individual in this group was a male carpenter from the island of Spanish Town (Virgin Gorda) and the youngest at age 16, was a young boy from Tortola who was indentured as a domestic servant.<sup>45</sup> The profile of these workers does not fit what Green describes as the general profile of those gaining freedom in the British Caribbean. Based on his research, Green observed that the majority of apprentices who purchased their freedom were females engaged in domestic work and that the smaller number of males involved were generally tradesmen.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> CO239/48 Reid to Glenelg 9 Feb. 1837; Riva Berleant-Schiller, "From Labourer to Peasant in Montserrat after the End of Slavery," in *Small Island Large Questions: Society, Culture and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean*, ed. Karen Fog Olwig (London: Frank Cass 1995), 58.

<sup>44</sup> C.O.239/48 Reid to Glenelg, Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> PP1839 (463) British Guyana Correspondence, Condition of Labourers (1839), 16-17, 22-23, 26-28, 40-47, 56-57.

<sup>46</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 134.

Sixty per cent of the migrant workers from the Virgin Islands - who were registered in Demerara in the period 1834-1838 - were indentured as agricultural workers. Those workers who were engaged as tradesmen (carpenters, coopers and masons) were 20 per cent of the group while domestic workers, comprising an equal number of males and females, made up 6 per cent of the number. Another observation that is worth mentioning is the fact that the workers who were engaged as sailors represented 5 per cent of the total number and were all from the island of Spanish Town.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to those apprentices who received their discharge and migrated to Demerara, there were those who remained in the Virgin Islands and made a living by cultivating cotton and provisions and keeping livestock, while the non-agricultural workers continued in their particular fields of endeavour.<sup>48</sup> There is also evidence to show that some labourers were freely manumitted by their masters. One such case relates to a member of the Road Town Methodist society who, a missionary reported, was given his freedom and employed as an overseer on the estate on which he lived. Rev. Hawkins observed that this individual had always benefitted from many privileges as a slave, being able to ride a fine horse to Town and owning a number of cattle, and concluded that this manumission was no doubt as a result of his industry and uprightness.<sup>49</sup> In Jamaica, on the Friendship and Greenwich estates, a plan was implemented in 1838 to manumit each month some of the best slaves and provide them with certain privileges. This plan was designed to ensure commitment to the estate after full emancipation and no doubt, in the interim, encourage a certain level of compliance among the remaining apprentices.<sup>50</sup> Hence, we see that even during the apprenticeship period, as during

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> CO239/47 S.M. Report 30 Aug. 1837.

<sup>49</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Hawkins 4 May 1835

<sup>50</sup> B. W. Higman, "To Begin the World Again": Responses to Emancipation at Friendship and Greenwich Estate, Jamaica," in *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom History, Heritage and Culture*, ed. Kathleen E.A. Monteith and Glen Richards (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 297-298.

slavery, workers were being enticed or cajoled into performing at a desired level to be worthy of special privileges.

By the end of the apprenticeship period, however, a total of about 240 apprentices in the Virgin Islands had exercised their right to gain manumission. The total number of manumissions during the apprenticeship period was more than 50 per cent of the total number of manumissions during the period 1818-1834. This increase in the number of manumission in the colony was partly dependent on certain external factors, the most prominent of which was the prospect of migrating. It is interesting to observe that in spite of the uncertainties and difficulties of relocating - considering the experiences noted in Chapter 2 - some of the apprentices in the colony decided to exercise their free choice with respect to movement and choice of work. Additionally, the availability of these choices made it easier for apprentices to negotiate better working conditions as planters had few other sources of labour if they decided to leave.<sup>51</sup>

### **Resistance and Signs of Discontent**

The apprenticeship system established in the British Caribbean at the abolition of slavery failed to deliver full and unrestricted freedom to the enslaved in the region. Instead, the freedom that was experienced within the bounds of the apprenticeship system could only be described as questionable or at best partial. Faced with prospects of losing the authority they held over their enslaved workers, the planters in the region manipulated the system to gain full control over every aspect of the lives of the apprentices. During slavery, fear, intimidation and violence were used to control the enslaved, but apprenticeship heralded a new era in which more subtle forms of control were utilized. New laws were instituted to regulate and control the freedom of the

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<sup>51</sup> C.O. 239/48 S. M. Report 1 March 1838; T71/370-375 Virgin Islands Slave Registers 1818, 1822, 1825, 1828, 1831 & 1834.

apprentices, in essence instituting new definitions of crime and criminality. As was their response during slavery, the apprentices accommodated the new system but continued to express their dissatisfaction in various ways.

In the Virgin Islands there remained an attitude of defiance against the apprenticeship system among the apprenticed labourers, as they felt its implementation was against the wishes of the King who intended for them to be free. It was widely rumoured in the colony that the King was fully in support of their defiant actions and that he had removed his crown from his head and vowed not to put it back on until all the people in the colony were free. Some of the provisions in the Acts passed in the Virgin Islands were repressive, infringing on the liberties of the labourers and as such had to be repealed once disallowed by the Secretary of State. For example Clauses 12 and 13 of Act no. 38 of the Virgin Islands prohibited apprentices from allowing anyone to visit their homes unless their employer and landlord had given consent. Lord Glenelg was of the opinion that such measures were in themselves illegal as ‘the apprentice [was] the tenant at will of the hut he occup[ied] paying rent in the form of services, and entitled to admit into his home whatever person he shall think proper, provided that his guest or inmates [did] not infringe the police regulations of the Colony, or the good discipline of the plantation.’<sup>52</sup>

Across the British Caribbean, under the apprenticeship system, the labourers were “liable for the quality and as well as the quantity of their work.” This meant that without exception, whether an apprentice was an agricultural or non-agricultural worker, they were expected to perform not just to the best of their ability but also to the expectations of their masters. Such expectations informed the unwritten contracts between apprentice

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<sup>52</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Hawkins 14 August 1835; PP1835 (278-11) Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Colonies part II, Glenelg to McGregor 28 July, 1835 No. 240 enclosures No. 37, 38, 39 & 40.



and masters, infraction of which could lead to charges by the latter relating to the indolence, carelessness, insubordination and negligence of apprentices. Thus, it stands to reason that since the former masters were the managers of the work process making the initial assessment on which the Special Magistrates would later rule, there were bound to be conflicts.<sup>53</sup>

Since apprenticeship was rarely accompanied by changes in the personnel responsible for estate management, the new labour relations were influenced negatively by the “habitual reliance on force and intimidation.”<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, since the apprenticeship system itself offered no consolation to the apprenticed labourers who wanted outright freedom, it was not surprising that there was strong resentment against the system. This resentment manifested itself in the apprentices’ attitudes and actions towards their work, as well as being evident in the number and range of punishments inflicted by special magistrates. Edward L. Cox found it surprising that in St Vincent during the first year of the apprenticeship as many as 12 per cent of the slaves in the colony received punishment. This number reflected wide dissatisfaction and perhaps even confusion about the new system on the part of the apprentices and directly reflected unsettled labour relations which continued to deteriorate as indicated by the growing number of punishments being inflicted as time progressed.<sup>55</sup>

In 1837, William Gordon, Special Magistrate in the Virgin Islands, reported that there was ‘a want of good feeling between employers and apprentice’ in the colony. While he went on to state that the situation was not widespread, he noted that it was as a direct result of the management style adopted by the some of the employers. These

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<sup>53</sup> Robert S. Shelton, “A Modified Crime: The Apprenticeship System in St. Kitts” *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol.16, No.3 (1995), 335.

<sup>54</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 131.

<sup>55</sup> Cox, “From Slavery to Freedom,” 375.

individuals, he said, seemed to have overlooked the fact that the status of their employees had changed and continued to deal with them in a harsh and spiteful manner. The apprentices, on the other hand, mindful of experiences during slavery, developed an attitude of distrust in relation to the actions and motives of their former masters. It was this type of situation that informed William Green's observation that a 'spirit of reconciliation and compromise' was needed to ensure the success of the apprenticeship system, and it was gravely lacking among the planters and apprentices in the British Caribbean.<sup>56</sup>

In this volatile environment where, as in slavery, the workers felt overwhelmed, it was individual expressions of disobedience rather than collective resistance that gave an indication of the levels of discontent that existed within the system. As the reality of their questionable freedom was revealed, and stringent measures adopted to control the apprentices were enforced, many of them became victims of the new justice system, which doled out punishments not dissimilar to those experienced during slavery. Moreover, in executing their duties, Special Magistrates were not afraid to inflict punishment for what might seem to have been trifling infringements of rules.<sup>57</sup>

By the end of the first year of apprenticeship in July 1835, a total of 467 apprentices (or 11 per cent of the former slave population) in the Virgin Islands were punished by the Special Magistrate for various forms of offences. Some 59 per cent of those punished were males.<sup>58</sup> Table 5.4 below shows that the offence for which the largest number of apprentices was punished was destruction of property, including breaking sugar cane. As we saw in Chapter 2, when the slaves on the Josiah's Bay Estate resisted their transfer to Trinidad, a large number of sugar canes were reported as destroyed. During

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<sup>56</sup> CO239/47 S.M. Report Aug. 30<sup>th</sup> 1837; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 130-131.

<sup>57</sup> McDonold, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, 15, 33; Marshal, ed. *The Colthurst Journal*, 29-30.

<sup>58</sup> CO239/47 S.M. Report 30 Aug. 1837.

slavery acts of sabotage against property were widely used as a form of resistance, even when it was at times difficult to prove that it was a deliberate act or even who was responsible. Both male and female apprentices ran away or absented themselves without approval from their work, continuing the tradition established under slavery. Although during slavery some absences were permitted to allow visits to family and friends on other estates, and even to travel to the nearby Danish Islands (See Chapter 4), the laws governing the apprenticeship system criminalized all forms of absence from one hour to an excess of two days. In these cases punishment included imprisonment, hard labour and corporal punishment.

**Table 5.3** Percentage of Apprentices Convicted for Offences 1834-1835

<b>Offences</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	0.36	0.52	<b>0.43</b>
<b>Indecent language</b>	0.36	2.62	<b>1.28</b>
<b>Fighting</b>	3.62	2.62	<b>3.21</b>
<b>Riotous conduct</b>	3.26	6.81	<b>4.71</b>
<b>Theft</b>	5.80	3.14	<b>4.71</b>
<b>Collective resistance</b>	3.99	9.95	<b>6.42</b>
<b>Negligence</b>	15.58	5.24	<b>11.35</b>
<b>Absence</b>	12.32	21.47	<b>16.06</b>
<b>Disrespect</b>	12.32	19.90	<b>15.42</b>
<b>Disobedience</b>	17.39	18.85	<b>17.99</b>
<b>Vandalism</b>	25.00	8.90	<b>18.42</b>
<b>Total</b>	100	100	<b>100</b>

Source: PP1836 (166-I)(166-II Abolition of Slavery

Interestingly, though, the offence for which the second largest number of labourers was punished was for combined resistance to lawful commands. Under Clause 9 of the Colonial Laws Number 38 which was passed by the Legislature of the Virgin Islands on

16 April 1834, if three or more apprentices agreed together to resist any lawful command given by their employer they would be guilty of a conspiracy and, if convicted, could be imprisoned with hard labour for up to six months and, in addition, receive up to 39 lashes. In spite of such legal consequences, apprenticed labourers continued to support each other in collective efforts to show displeasure with the level of treatment they were experiencing.<sup>59</sup>

One example of combined or collective resistance to lawful authority involved a group of five apprentices on the Ross Estate on the island of Tortola. The ringleader of the group, Pompey, who was ordered by the Special Magistrate to carry out extra work, refused and, in refusing, was supported by other labourers. Together, the group defied the authority of the estate manager. Governor Colebrooke, in commenting on the case, was concerned that the frequent turnover of managers on the estate resulted in mismanagement of the property in question, encouraging an attitude of negligence among the labourers and prompting intervention by the Special Magistrate. In this case, Pompey was given 25 lashes and his colleagues sentenced to hard labour and confinement for up to six weeks. While accepting that he had no intention of evaluating the proceedings of the magistrate, Colebrooke felt that greater care should have been taken in the application of punishment as it could be seen that the authority of the magistrate was being used to bolster the weakness of the estate management.<sup>60</sup>

There is no doubt that the issue of additional labour imposed on the apprenticed labourers would have always been met with resistance as it infringed on their personal time which they were at liberty to use however they wanted. This vigilance on the part of the apprenticed labourers was necessary because estate owners went to great lengths

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<sup>59</sup> PP1835 (278-11) Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Colonies part II, Glenelg to McGregor 28 July, 1835, No. 240, enclosures No. 39.

<sup>60</sup> CO239/48 Colebrooke to Glenelg 5 April 1838, No. 32.

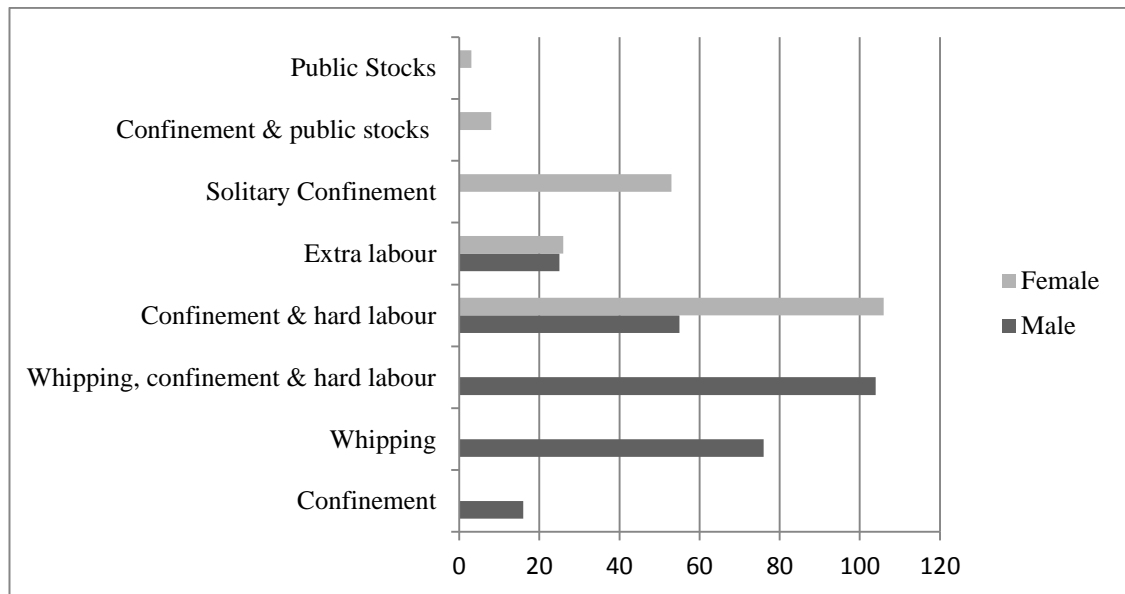
to extract extra labour from their workers. One example of such a situation involved a coloured planter, George Hill, the proprietor of the Long Bush Estate on Tortola, who wanted to compel his labourers to put in extra hours to make up for time lost during bad weather. Magistrate Gordon, who was “struck by the injustice” of the demand, nevertheless sought legal advice on the matter as he felt the law was silent on the issue. Charles Lloyd, King’s Council in the Virgin Islands, in reviewing the case, stated that the weather was beyond the control of the labourers and it was therefore unjust to insist that they work extra time in compensation. Lord Glenelg, Secretary of State, concurred with the decision of Lloyd and directed that the labourers could not be compelled to make up the deficiency.<sup>61</sup>

Table 5.3 also shows that there was a distinct difference with respect to the offences of each sex. While the larger share of male offenders were involved in acts of resistance like destroying property and negligence, female offenders were involved in more confrontational behaviour centring on disrespecting, disobeying, and collectively resisting authority. Throughout the British Caribbean, female apprentices were considered to be the most troublesome and difficult to manage. Gad Heuman has suggested that this situation was a direct response by women to the stringent conditions placed on them by the planters. These individuals who made up the backbone of the field workers would have been hit hardest by the withdrawal of allowances and privileges, as noted earlier, and would have been hard pressed to fulfil their work duties as assigned while taking care of their families. Thus, the women’s response was a direct attempt to defend the privileges they had worked hard to attain during the period of slavery.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> PP1836(166-1) (166-11) Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Colonies Part III MacGregor to Glenelg 14 September, 1835, No.356 & Glenelg to Macgregor, 12 Nov. 1835, No. 357.

<sup>62</sup> Heuman, *The Caribbean*, 96-99; Wilmot, “Not ‘Full Free,’” 8,



**Figure 5.1** Punishment inflicted on Apprentices, 1834-1835, PP1836 (166-1) Abolition of Slavery Part III MacGregor to Glenelg No.335 enclosure no. 32,

If women's offences differed from those of males, so did their punishments. Figure 5.1 above shows that while the women were not subject to corporal punishment like men in relation to their offences, they experienced more sentences of confinement and hard labour than their male counterparts. Additionally, the number of women who were assigned extra labour was also slightly higher than the men who received the same punishment. Seemingly to make up for the fact that the law prohibited inflicting corporal punishment on women, they alone were subjected to confinement in public stocks and solitary confinement. Here we cannot help but wonder if such a humiliating and degrading punishment was not designed to break the spirit of the women whom the planters no doubt saw as a threat to the discipline of the estate. For example, a female apprentice who was found guilty of harbouring another apprentice in her hut (probably before the section of the Act as cited earlier was repealed) was sentenced to solitary

confinement. Another female apprentice was also sentenced to solitary confinement for the use of indecent language (Figure 5.1).<sup>63</sup>

In spite of the difficulties of the apprenticeship system across the British Caribbean, its administration in the Virgin Islands was described generally as ‘comparatively lenient.’<sup>64</sup> This conclusion was based on the fact that the number of apprentices sentenced to punishment during the period 1 August 1835 to 31 March 1836 had fallen to an average of 27 per month from a high of 38 per month during the previous twelve months. Further, the records also show that during the month of November 1837 only twelve apprentices were charged before the magistrate with offences. Half of these offences related to absences and the remainder included acts of disobedience and neglect of duty. The magistrate dismissed two of the charges, which related to disobedience. In one case in particular, the magistrate found that the order given to Jacob by his employer, J. I. Well, was unreasonable. Jacob, who resided on Beef Island, had been out fishing for most of the day and when he returned was ordered to make the seven-mile trip to Road Town by boat before he could have something to eat.<sup>65</sup>

Apprenticeship offered a compromised form of freedom, which the ex-slaves in the region were not comfortable with, as it did not meet their hopes and aspirations. As under slavery, the ex-slaves made certain adjustments where necessary and at other times quietly or even forcefully resisted the demands of planters. In the early stages, resistance to the system through direct and indirect means set a tone in seeking to increase apprentices’ power in negotiations. Thus within this limited framework the apprentices learned to value their time and guard closely the limited freedom that was

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<sup>63</sup> PP1836 (166-1) Abolition of Slavery Part III MacGregor to Glenelg No.335 enclosure no. 32, Table B Return of Punishment (1836), 347, 352

<sup>64</sup> Punishments Inflicted under the Apprenticeship; Extract from the Appendix to a Recently Published by the Committee of the London Anti-Slavery Society on Negro Apprenticeship in the British Colonies (London, 1838), 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.; C.O.239/49 S. M. Report, November, 1837.

afforded them. Their objective was to maximize the benefits to be derived from any activity as they attempted to create a life of their own that would eventually be independent of the plantation system.<sup>66</sup>

In the case of the Virgin Islands, it is recognised that with respect to the level of autonomy that the enslaved developed during the final decades of slavery (See Chapter 4), apprenticeship was a retrograde step that derailed their progress and strengthened the hands of the financially ailing planters. The level of oppression that was legally allowed during the first year of the apprenticeship system impacted negatively on labour relations, but as the new repressive laws were removed, the system improved to the benefit of both the apprentices and the planters. Indeed, by July 1836, the President of the Virgin Islands, in addressing the Council and House of Assembly, commented on the improvement in the functioning of the apprenticeship system, noting that there were ‘more favourable results than at one time were anticipated.’ By October 1837, Magistrate Gordon also reported that many of the employers were being more generous to their employees, giving allowances that exceeded the requirements of the law. Some improvement in the position of apprentices, as discussed earlier, also arose as a result of the apprentices themselves making choices with respect to purchasing their freedom and to migrating overseas.<sup>67</sup>

## Summary

The apprenticeship system, which was implemented in the British Caribbean after the abolition of slavery, failed to deliver full and unrestricted freedom as expected by the enslaved in the region. Instead, the freedom that was experienced can only be described

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<sup>66</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, Chapter 5; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, Chapter 2;

<sup>67</sup> C.O.239/43 MacGregor to Lord Glenelg 12 July 1836, No. 153 Enclosure No.5; C. O. 239/47 S. M. Report Oct.1837.



as questionable as it threatened to roll back the gains that the enslaved had attained through the difficult years of slavery. In particular, in the Virgin Islands apprenticeship strengthened the hands of the planters as the system was heavily biased in their favour, allowing them to use legal means to repress and control their workers. As in the case of slavery, as ex-slaves the apprentices expressed their dissatisfaction with the system through varying acts of resistance as reflected in the range of punishments inflicted on them by the Special Magistrate. Some of the ex-slaves also exercised their right to manumission, which allowed some to migrate to other colonies in search of better paying jobs. In spite of the difficulties experienced during apprenticeship, the ex-slaves in the Virgin Islands were able to further extend their hold on the internal market and exports to St. Thomas. In the next chapter we will explore how these modest gains under apprenticeship were built upon after 1838, as freedmen in the Virgin Islands consolidated their freedom through peasant proprietorship, the control of the internal market, and their ability to dominate the growth in exports of cattle and livestock as sugar declined in significance.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Post Emancipation**

This chapter outlines chronologically the experience of the ex-slaves in the Virgin Islands, as they sought to attain meaningful freedom in the first decades after apprenticeship ended in 1838. The varying methods of labour control that were instituted by the planters, and the resistance that these met from the labourers will be examined in detail. Additionally, the levels and range of economic adjustment within the colony in response to wage labour and the continued development of the internal economy, which was largely controlled by the labourers, will be looked at. Further, the causes and impact of the 1853 cattle tax riot will be reviewed and finally, the issue of land acquisition by the free blacks and coloureds in the colony will be examined.

The decision in 1838 to grant full freedom to all categories of apprenticed labourers throughout the British Caribbean, meant that a new system of wage labour would prevail in many places. Under this new system, certain liberties were accorded to the labourer, but the planters and former masters were quick to institute stringent measures of labour control to tie the ex-slaves to the estate and limit their movement. These measures were considered necessary since it was felt that freed men and women would shy away from working on the estates if alternatives were available. Against this backdrop, even with an extensive level of manipulation of the system, there were still uncertainties as to how the ex-apprentices would really react to full emancipation. Colonies like St Kitts and Barbados - which were densely populated and with planters in possession of the most land - provided the greatest opportunity for controlling the labourers. The labourers, on the other hand, had their own hopes and expectations with respect to full freedom. They had waited all their lives for freedom and were prepared to take full responsibility for themselves and create a new life based on foundations

established during slavery and apprenticeship. The resources they required, however, were controlled by others and, as during slavery, they needed to calculate the best way to access vital resources.<sup>1</sup>

In the Virgin Islands, the reaction of the labourers to the news about full emancipation was taken as evidence that there was nothing to fear and that it was highly likely that work in the colony would progress almost uninterrupted. It was anticipated that the new system of wage labour would be embraced to the benefit of all. In evaluating the mood of the apprenticed labourers with respect to the decision to grant full emancipation, Benjamin Tregashis, a Methodist missionary in the Virgin Islands, stated he did ‘not see any signs of impatience or discontent’ among the ex-slaves. However, he believed, based on information he had received, that some of the labourers would leave the estates and seek to establish themselves elsewhere, but he expected that the majority of the population would accept the new order and quietly work for wages.<sup>2</sup>

There was no doubt that considering the strained relationships of the past, an attitude of reconciliation was needed to ensure the smooth functioning of the free society. The possibility existed that some estates could have lost all of their labourers because of the history of bad treatment of the former slaves during slavery and apprenticeship. In spite of this, there was still the feeling within the Virgin Islands that the outcome was dependent on the planters who, needed to adopt the necessary measures to ensure that

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<sup>1</sup> O. Nigel Bolland, “Systems of Domination after Slavery: The Control of Land and Labour in the British West Indies after Slavery,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No.4 (1981), 592; Karen Fog Olwig, ed. Introduction: Emancipation and its Consequences, in *Small Islands Large Question Society, Culture and Resistance in the Post- Emancipation* ( London: Frank Cass, 1995), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Methodist Missionary Society (MMS) West Indies Correspondence, Tortola, Benjamin Tregaskis 27 July 1838; British Parliamentary Papers (PP) 1837-38 (535)(727) Abolition of the System of Apprenticeship, Colebrooke to Glenelg, April 18<sup>th</sup> 1838 No. 15; PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands Colebrooke to Glenelg 18 April 1838 No. 130.

they did not lose their most valued workers.<sup>3</sup> This same level of uncertainty existed in other British Caribbean colonies, for example, in the Windward Islands, where the historian Woodville K. Marshall discovered that serious issues regarding labour relations were looming and they could threaten the relative peace of the colonies.<sup>4</sup>

By proclamation, 1 August 1838, was a holiday and celebrated as a day of thanksgiving and divine services were held throughout the Virgin Islands. At the close of the day, the newly appointed President of the colony, R. M. Thomas, informed the Secretary of State that: ‘Thus far the emancipated population was peaceful, orderly and respectful, giving an earnest of future conduct, affording the most favourable presumption, from all I can learn, that the labourers will cheerfully enter on their several duties on Monday next, the first working day’<sup>5</sup> Rev. Tregaskis, the Methodist missionary, on the other hand, stated that his earlier prediction with regards to labourers leaving the estates had come true. He was, however, happy to report that the labourers who left several estates en masse later returned and to all indications negotiated favourable terms and conditions with the estate owners.<sup>6</sup>

### **Methods of Control**

The success of the plantation economies of the region depended on the availability of a stable supply of labour at reasonable cost. For decades the planters had had control of their labour force, extracting from them the labour that was required to maintain high levels of production of tropical staples. The interim years of the apprenticeship period provided an opportunity for them to adjust to the process of labour management and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Woodville K. Marshall, “Apprenticeship and labour Relations in Four Windward Islands,” in *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context, 1790-1916* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 215-216.

<sup>5</sup> PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands, Thomas to Glenelg, 1 August 1838 No.134.

<sup>6</sup> MMS West Indies Correspondence, Tortola Benjamin Tregaskis 17 October, 1838.

paying wages but did little to redress their sense of loss of control of their workers. The economic survival of the colonies and the livelihood of the planters depended upon a continued source of labour: the estates needed the labourers as much as the labourers needed the estates. In this equation, the planters calculated that through coercion they could compel the ex-slaves to work continuously on the sugar estates. There was no doubt that the preference of the ex-slaves was to expend their energies in the planting and marketing of produce from their gardens. With this in mind, planters tried to bind their labourers to the estates by offering them contracts that included free access to land for cultivation and pasturage.

In the Virgin Islands, the majority of labourers accepted the terms of employment offered on the estates that hired them, and commenced their work in sugar-cane cultivation for wages, with ‘free’ access to provision grounds and pasture for their animals. In accepting these contracts, the labourers were compelled to work on the estates if they wished to maintain a roof over their heads. Any withdrawal from work resulted in threats of eviction from houses and provision grounds.<sup>7</sup> The acceptance of the contracts offered by the estates did not in itself indicate a vote of confidence in the system, but showed the extent to which the ex-slaves were prepared to go to access the resources that they needed. On Friendship and Greenwich estates in Jamaica, the freed people’s willingness to remain on the estates mainly reflected their commitment or attachment to their homes and provision grounds, which they had long occupied. They recognised the value of these facilities and were not prepared to leave them prematurely.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands, Thomas to Glenelg, 9 August, 1838, No.135.

<sup>8</sup> Higman, “To Begin the World Again’: Responses to Emancipation at Friendship and Greenwich Estate, Jamaica” in *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage and Culture*, eds. Kathleen E. A. Monteith and Glenn Richards (Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 292.

Most of the estates in the Virgin Islands were able to get their workers to agree to contracts ranging from one week to six months. The majority of these were verbal contracts as the workers were widely opposed to entering into any type of written agreements. The freedom newly attained by the workers was jealously guarded and they were suspicious of any signed agreement that could in any way question that status. Jack Hodge, one of the workers on the Long Bush Estate, agreed to the terms of his contract but refused to sign it, stating that he would not put his hands to paper. Thus, the verbal contracts offered a level of flexibility and control on the part of the labourers in regard to time commitment and could be terminated by them giving one week's notice.<sup>9</sup> Gad Heuman also observed that across the region ex-slaves were not eager to enter into written contracts of any kind as they were seen to closely reflect the concept of compulsory labour. The employers, too, displayed a preference for verbal contracts, most probably based on what they perceived as advantages in their favour. This included the termination clause.<sup>10</sup>

On the Long Bush Estate on Tortola, several specific contracts were entered into between the proprietor, the Honourable George Hill, and a number of workers in September 1838. These contracts, which varied from six to twelve months, covered a range of services from cutting grass to overseeing the estate. By agreement, each worker and his family was given, in addition to his basic wage, access to a house or lodging, provision ground, pasture and the means to cut grass and wood when needed. While no medical assistance was offered to the workers, they were offered bonus incentives according to their area of work. The 19 labourers on the estate - comprising 13 women and 6 men - were offered a quarter bottle of rum weekly for the men and one pound of

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<sup>9</sup> PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands, Labour Act, No. 110 Clause 8 & 9, Stipendiary Magistrates (S.M.) Reports October & November 1838 & March 1839.

<sup>10</sup> Gad Heuman, "Is this what you call free?": Riots and Resistance in the Anglophone Caribbean," in *Contesting Freedom Control and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean*, ed. Gad Heuman and David V. Trotman (Oxford: Macmillian Publishers, 2005), 109.

sugar weekly for the women if they worked continuously for five days. The only woman among the labourers to be given a twelve-month contract was Diana, who was accorded flexibility to work only when it was convenient as she had children to take care of.<sup>11</sup>

One of the tradesmen on the Long Bush Estate, Clash alias Peter Hill, who was the blacksmith, was given liberty to use the workshop to perform private work for his own benefit provided he had completed all the estate work assigned to him. The head-men on the estate were also given bonuses in the performance of their duties; Abraham Hodge the under-overseer was given a pound and a half of sugar and a bottle of rum every week while Shadrach Hodge, the driver, was given one bottle of rum every week. The labourers on the estate worked a five-day week from Monday to Friday, nine hours a day. The basic rate of pay in the colony was six pence a day, about 33 per cent less than what was paid during the final year of apprenticeship. This was seemingly not unusual. Woodville Marshall also found that in the wider British Caribbean, wages for freedmen were 35 per cent less than during apprenticeship. During crop time, as was always the case, the labourers were expected to work overtime and were paid an hourly rate which was higher than the regular rate. In the event that the contract was terminated, it was agreed that the labourers would be given sufficient time to reap the produce in their provision grounds.<sup>12</sup>

As a part of the labour contracts, the workers continued to occupy their houses and provision grounds as tenants at will. As was stated earlier, no rent was collected but the workers were expected to make themselves available to the estate in the execution of their assigned tasks. While there was a general desire on the part of the ex-slaves in the

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<sup>11</sup> PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands, Colebrooke to Glenelg, 7 January, 1839, No.142.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Marshall, Apprenticeship and Labourer Relations, 205-221;

Virgin Islands to buy land and establish themselves away from the estates - as was the case in other British Caribbean colonies - the planters who possessed the land were unwilling to sell. Thus, the estates offered the only means of access to land for the purpose of planting provisions and keeping animals - activities that enabled the ex-slaves to feed themselves and improve their material condition. These resources were extremely important to ex-slaves. In December 1838, Magistrate Gordon, in commenting on the conduct of the labourers in the Virgin Islands, stated that 'they work cheerfully for their employers and devote a considerable amount of their leisure time to the cultivation of their grounds.'<sup>13</sup>

The use of this system of contractual agreements, verbal or written, linked to wage labour, was fully supported by the colony's legal structure, thus enabling workers to seek legal redress when they felt their rights were being violated. On 29 November 1838, Tom Billy was taken before the magistrate by his employer, James B. Nibbs, proprietor of the Nibbs Estate in Sea Cows Bay, Tortola. He was accused of terminating his contract without due notice. In his defence, Tom Billy informed the court that he left the job because he was not being paid, a claim that Nibbs denied. To support his position, Nibbs presented his account books to prove that Tom Billy was fully paid. When the books were examined by the magistrate, they were found to contain discrepancies which revealed that Tom was indeed owed for work done. Nibbs was ordered to pay the sum and the complaint against Tom Billy was dismissed on the grounds that he had a reasonable excuse for his absenting himself from the job. The

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Hall, "The flight from the Estates Reconsidered: The British west Indies, 1838-1842," *Journal of Caribbean History*, Vol.10, No. 11 (1978), 18-22; Riva Berleant-Schiller, "From Labour to Peasantry in Montserrat after the End of Slavery" in *Small Island Large Question Society, Culture and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean*, ed. Karen Fog Olwig (London: Frank Cass 1995), 60; Olwig 1995:3-6; PP1839(107-V) Papers Related to the West Indies Part III, Leeward Islands S. M. Report November 1838.



magistrate used the opportunity to explain to Tom Billy the proper procedure that he should follow in such a case when there were grievances.<sup>14</sup>

William Robertson, a mason employed on the Ballast Bay Estate, followed the correct procedures and complained to the magistrate that he was terminated from his employment and that an exorbitant amount was deducted from his wages. The case stemmed from the fact that the manager of the estate, Hon. James D. Roger, had agreed with the mechanics on the estate to deduct from their wages rent for the houses they occupied and for the land they used for provision grounds and pasture. In the case of William, no special agreement had been entered into with Roger and it was determined that the amount deducted from his wages far exceeded any benefits he would have derived. Thus, the money that was withheld was ordered paid to William Robertson.<sup>15</sup> But the complaints of the labourers against their employers were not always with respect to non-payment of wages. Hannah, a servant on the Pleasant Valley Estate who was employed on a verbal contract for one week, brought a charge that she was struck by the manager of the estate, John L. R. Coakly, for which he was found guilty and fined by the magistrate.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of above examples of dissatisfactions experienced by the workers in the Virgin Islands as they adjusted to the new system of wage labour, by the end of 1841 it was reported that the relationship between the workers and the planters, for the most part, was satisfactory. However, continuing issues arising from the fact that the workers had no established rights to their cottages and the provision grounds and pastures they used, threatened to destabilize the whole system. There was no separation between rent and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> CO239/59 S. M. Report April 30<sup>th</sup> 1840

labour as proprietors used the privilege of cottages and provision grounds to force them to work on their estates. In this situation, the workers were threatened with eviction when they did not comply with the wishes of the estate owners or if they absented themselves from work even for the shortest possible time. The workers saw these threats as a direct infringement of their liberty as they expected to be able to sell their labour to whosoever they wished to without reservation. Further, it was felt that since the workers knew they could be evicted from their cottages and compelled to give up their provision grounds on short notice, they would not expend any energy in such ventures.<sup>17</sup>

This situation was not unique to the Virgin Islands, as in other colonies in the British Caribbean the issues of occupancy of houses and provision grounds caused major contentions when proprietors used the lack of access to land as a means of controlling their labourers and keeping them tied to the estates. There was no question that the labourers had strong ties or connections with the land on which, in some cases, they had spent their whole lives and were prepared to do whatever it took to retain occupancy, even at times accommodating the demands of the planters.<sup>18</sup>

In the Virgin Islands, as there was not a system that separated labour from rent, the workers were at the mercy of the planters who progressively became more demanding and harsh in their approach to dealing with them. In certain instances the planters made excessive demands on their workers, threatening to evict them when they refused to labour for ridiculously low wages. This change in attitude was encouraged by a ruling in Guyana that was gazetted on 27 January 1842, upholding the right of planters to impose sanctions on workers in an attempt to reduce overall production costs. In the Virgin

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<sup>17</sup> CO239/67 S.M. Report, 31 December 1841

<sup>18</sup> B. W. Higman, "To Begin the World Again", 299-303; Marshall, "Apprenticeship and labour Relations", 219.

Islands, this was interpreted to mean that planters could immediately evict labourers from their cottages and provision grounds if they were absent from work, or if they refused to renew their contracts. Governor Fitzroy was of the view that such a development was ‘likely to interrupt the good feeling which prevailed between the planters and the labourers,’ but he was conscious of the fact that any attempt to impose legislation to correct the situation would not have the desired effect. In the Governor’s opinion, ‘it was an evil which [had to] be left to itself’, with the hope that good judgement and common sense would prevail. The planters were being short-sighted and their actions had the potential to alienate the workers and force them to seek other avenues such as migration as a means of self-defence. This issue, with regards to rent, was not unique to the Virgin Islands, as Douglas Hall found that it was one of the vexing issues that forced labourers all over the British Caribbean to leave the estate and to seek to establish themselves elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

In August 1846, the manager of Anderson Estate on Tortola, Thomas Hunter, gave instructions to remove the windows, doors and roof from a cottage occupied by Joan Anderson and her elderly parents. This action was taken because Joan travelled to St Thomas and on her return chose to work on an estate in Cane Garden Bay. Hunter informed Joan’s parents that he would put them off the estate if Joan did not come back to work for him. After the main house was made uninhabitable, the family moved into a small hut which they had previously used as a kitchen. Joan returned to work on the Anderson Estate but in March the following year, while on the job she fell and cut her knee. As a result, she was away from work for two weeks. Upon her recovery, Joan again travelled to St Thomas where she stayed for four days and in her absence, the constable on the Anderson Estate, Hector, was sent to pull down the kitchen in which

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<sup>19</sup> Hall, “The flight from the Estates,” 20; CO 239/68 SM Report Jan. & July 1842; CO 239/68 Fitzroy to President of the Virgin Islands 22 Aug. 1842; C.O.239/71 S.M. Report Jan. 1843; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 198.

the family lived. When Hector went to the hut, he found inside Joan's elderly father, Virgil, very sick and as a result refrained from carrying out the instructions. Upon being informed of the situation, Thomas Hunter went to the hut to confirm for himself that Virgil was indeed ill. Seeking an alternative sanction, therefore, Hunter sent a small gang to destroy everything in Joan's provision ground. On the same day the provision ground was destroyed, Joan had returned from St Thomas and reported to work on the estate but was asked to leave by the manager. On 15 May 1847, while Joan was lying sick in bed, Hunter had the one-room house in which she was staying pulled down, leaving her "lying in the open heaven."<sup>20</sup>

The above case and several others like it caused great concern on the part of the special magistrate in the Virgin Islands, as he was informed by the colony's law officer for the crown that pulling down a labourer's cottage was not an indictable offence. So adamant were the estate managers on this matter that one of them stated "If a man disobeys an order of the manager of the estate it is a virtual discharge of himself. If I discharge a man tomorrow I can pull down his house – If a labourer disobeys orders and refuses to quit the estate I can pull down his house."<sup>21</sup> Magistrate Dyett was convinced that if estate managers and proprietors treated and respected their labourers as men equally free as themselves, most of the problems would not exist.<sup>22</sup> The only form of redress the magistrate was able to give the labourers in this vexing issue was with regards to produce in their provision grounds. Thus, in the event that labours left an estate, they had a basic right to reap the crops they had planted which meant that they had to be given adequate time to do so.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> C.O. 243/10 S. M. Report 30 June 1847 Table C

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> C. O. 239/67 S.M. Report, 31 December 1841

<sup>23</sup> C.O. 239/68 S. M. Report, 30 June 1842

In their quest to survive during the first few years of full freedom, the ex-slaves in the Virgin Islands accepted the labour contracts offered by the planters, even though the wages paid were commonly less than what they had received during the apprenticeship period. The contracts included free accommodation and access to land, which they used to feed themselves and to supplement their income. Recognising the ex-slaves' dependence on provision grounds, planters used threats of eviction to force the labourers to not only work for them but also to accept whatever wage they wished to pay. As the planters' attitudes towards the labourers became harsher, concerns were expressed that a system of rent separate from labour was needed to give the workers freedom of choice and a level of security. There were fears that if the matter remained unresolved, workers would adopt their own means of self-defence against the planters.<sup>24</sup>

### **Passive Resistance**

At the commencement of full legal freedom, the ex-slaves in the British Caribbean had their own expectations of freedom, which at times were in conflict with those of their former masters. In their view, as freed men and women they had the right to do as they chose, even if that meant doing nothing. They had spent all their lives working for the benefit of others and as a result there were those individuals who had made up their minds that they would not work for anyone again. There were others who felt that if they worked it should always be on their own terms if and when they felt like it. These views, however, went against the established order of the day wherein the planters had established laws to control the lives of the ex-slaves, thereby ensuring that they had a continuous labour supply. Again, as during slavery, the ex-slaves sought means to resist

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<sup>24</sup>Hall, "The flight from the Estates," 17; Bolland, "Systems of Domination after Slavery," 592-593; Heuman 1995:132; Heuman, "Is this what you call free?", 105-106; CO 239/68 Fitzroy to President of the Virgin Islands 22 Aug. 1842

the dictates of the new order which usurped their rights to make personal decisions that were in conflict with the planters' need to extract their labour.<sup>25</sup>

In the Virgin Islands during the first two months of freedom, a total of seven persons who refused to work were convicted of vagrancy under an Act hastily passed by the colony's legislature about two weeks before full emancipation was instituted. The Vagrancy Act, which was wide-ranging, made provisions for the appointment of rural constables from among the freedmen to police their communities. It was recommended that on estates the labourers would be allowed to elect their own constables. This was, however, opposed by estate owners who saw it as a 'sacrifice of power.' There was clearly a lack of confidence on the part of the former masters with regards to the ability of the labourers to select their best men, but proponents of the measure convinced them that it was the best way forward.<sup>26</sup> Under the Vagrancy Act, persons were prohibited from entering and using any property, without authorisation, for the purpose of cultivation, pasturing animals, or cutting wood and grass. In spite of the fact that there were many disused estates in the Virgin Islands, the law made it impossible for freed people to establish a life for themselves away from the estates on which they lived, by squatting on vacant property.<sup>27</sup>

On 9 August 1838, Goodluck, who had refused to take any employment and was living on a disused estate with several others, was apprehended by Andrew Hannah, a rural constable, and taken before a Justice of the Peace. Goodluck was convicted of vagrancy and fined 20s. Being unable to pay, he was sent to prison for one month. In addition, Goodluck was also required to pay 7s.1½d., which was to cover the cost of the

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<sup>25</sup> Heuman, "Is this what you call free?", 105-117; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 192-229

<sup>26</sup> PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands Colebrooke to Glenelg, 16 August 1838 No.138, Act for the Suppression of Vagrancy No. 109

<sup>27</sup> PP 1839(107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies Part III Leeward Islands Vagrancy Act, No.109

constable. Fanny was also charged on 9 August 1838, for being idle and living in an abandoned hut without any visible means of support. She was convicted for vagrancy and fined 6d. and charged 4s.1½d. to cover the constable's costs. Fanny agreed to take employment for Judy Hannah, who in return paid the cost to the constable, while the magistrate paid the fine.<sup>28</sup>

These examples clearly show that the legal system was designed to force individuals to work through the imposition of heavy fines, which they were unable to meet on their own. Those individuals who were unable to pay the fines were subjected to imprisonment with hard labour, working on public infrastructure (roads) to pay off the debt. One fact, however, about the Vagrancy Act, which later led to it being disallowed, was that local magistrates, who in actuality were planters, were given authority to make summary convictions. This issue also raised concerns in Jamaica where the Governor argued that individuals should be trusted to be impartial in executing their roles.<sup>29</sup> In December 1838, when a new Vagrancy Act was passed in the Virgin Islands and the old Act repealed, the power to convict individuals was limited only to stipendiary magistrates. Interestingly, after the revocation of the power of the local magistrate to convict individuals for vagrancy, there was only one conviction made by the stipendiary magistrate.<sup>30</sup>

While most workers accepted contracts to work for their former masters, there were no guarantees that they would work as required. The historian William Green noted that workers were not always in regular attendance at work and, even when present, were not always vigilant and careful in carrying out their duties. These findings echo the

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<sup>28</sup> PP 1839 (107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies, Part III, Leeward Islands S.M. Report August 1838.

<sup>29</sup> Holt, *The Problem of Freedom* 184-186.

<sup>30</sup> PP 1839 (107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies, Part III, Leeward Islands, Colebrooke to Marquess of Normanby 10 June 1839, No.113; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom* 184-185.

behaviour of the former enslaved who resisted their enslavement and found creative ways to reduce the pace and stress of their work. In the Virgin Islands, the records show that ex-slaves were far from content with work arrangements and, in spite of the consequences, passively resisted. On the Ballast Bay Estate, Jobel, a labourer who had absented himself for eight days without notifying his employer, on 28 September 1838 was fined 6s. and charged 14s. costs. Similarly, Joe Martin, who worked as a boiler, was fined 2s. on 24 November 1838, for leaving his work without permission for just three hours.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, several workers were found guilty of refusing to carry out the work to which they were assigned. For example, on 25 February 1840, Fanny Hodge, a worker on the Belle Vue Estate, was fined 2s.6d. because she refused to perform the work to which she was assigned. Similarly, Sam Georges was convicted and fined the same amount on 28 August 1838, because he refused to go to work and left his employer without giving notice. Further, several workers were also charged for negligence. For example, Harry Georges and Simon Maclean, who were stock keepers on Lower Estate, were charged with negligent performance of duty on 29 August 1840, and Paris, a labourer on Nibbs Estate, was imprisoned on 15 February 1840, for ill-treating a mule belonging to the estate.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to individual acts of defiance or resistance, workers all over the region collectively resisted unfair terms and conditions that were offered to them by their employers. In particular, attempts to reduce wages in several British Caribbean Colonies were met with opposition and strike actions on the part of workers. When workers were

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<sup>31</sup>Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 129-161; PP 1839 (107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies, Part III, Leeward Islands, S. M. Report Aug. & Nov. 1838, 323-330.

<sup>32</sup>CO 239/59 S.M. Report Feb. 1840; CO 239/60 S.M. Report Oct. 1840; PP 1839 (107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies, Part III, Leeward Islands, S. M. Report Aug. & Nov. 1838, 327; C.O.239/59 S.M. Report Feb. 1840.



faced with situations that went against their own expectation with regards to their status as free people, they stopped work and went on strike. In the Virgin Islands, Stipendiary Magistrate Dyett noted that in 1841 the workers on one estate refused to commence harvesting the crop because they had unsettled issues regarding their contract. The situation was not made any easier by the hard stance that the planter took and Dyett had to intervene to help resolve the matter.<sup>33</sup>

The withdrawal of women, especially those with young children, from field work was another means by which ex-slaves resisted new working arrangements. This was more widespread in some colonies than others, largely reflecting the availability of land on which the freed people could subsist. While the reasons for the removal of women from paid labour were multifaceted, part of the explanation lay in the unresolved tension that developed during the apprenticeship period between the planters and women with regards to privileges and the issue of apprenticing their children. The withdrawal of women and children from the estates indicated a specific attempt on the part of the ex-slaves to restructure their family life.<sup>34</sup>

In the Virgin Islands, from as early as September 1838, it was reported that many females who had formerly engaged in fieldwork were employed in domestic operations. Additionally, children, particularly females, were withdrawn from fieldwork by their parents and where possible were sent to school. In 1847 President Hay noted the contribution of the Methodist church to education in the colony. Across the colony two types of school were operated: day schools and Sunday schools, and, Hay observed, the

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<sup>33</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 194-195, 236-237; Woodville K. Marshall, "We be wise to many more tings': Blacks' Hopes and Expectations of Emancipation" in *Caribbean Freedom: Society and Economy From Emancipation to Present*, eds. Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993), 17; Bolland, "Systems of Domination after Slavery," 112-113; Hall, "The flight from the Estates," 11; C.O. 239/63 S.M. Report May 1841.

<sup>34</sup> Bridget Brereton, "Family Strategies, Gender, and the Shift to Wage labor in the British Caribbean" in *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, ed. Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, (London: Duke University Press 2005), 144-145.

total number of students that accessed education was 1,247. The parents showed a keen interest in supporting the efforts of the church by contributing to and assisting in the building of chapels, which were also used as schools. On Thatch Island, the people pooled their resources and efforts to erect a chapel in 1846, which was to be used as a school for their children. As external funding to run schools became limited, parents willingly paid weekly fees for their children's education. At one school on Tortola, some of the children took an active part in contributing to the school by helping to transport material to build a house for the schoolmaster. The value of the children's labour was taken as payment towards their school fees.<sup>35</sup>

Earlier it was observed that while the labourers in the Virgin Islands, like elsewhere, had a strong desire to obtain land, the planters and landowners were not willing to sell or rent.<sup>36</sup> By 1841 though, there were instances where labourers were able to rent small portions of land on which they established themselves in cultivating provisions, pasturing animals, and burning lime; mainly for sale in St Thomas. In 1845 Magistrate Dyett noted that while no new villages had been established in the colony since emancipation, there were small settlements forming in different parts of Tortola, which in time could develop into villages. This development, it seems, was linked to the removal of a tax on smallholding and provision grounds that were not attached to estates. There was even at least one instance where a labourer rented an acre of land and planted sugar cane, which he proposed could be refined into sugar by a neighbouring sugar estate for half of the produce. Dyett further observed that the greatest obstacles that prevented the labourers from purchasing available land, were the high cost of legal

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<sup>35</sup> PP 1839 (107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies, Part III, Leeward Islands S.M. Report Sept. 1838; CO243/10 S. M. Report Dec. 1846 & Dec. 1847; PP1846(728) Reports Exhibiting the Past and Present, Virgin Islands, No. 25; PP1847 - 48 (749) Sugar Growing Colonies Virgin Islands Higginson to Earl Grey 4 May 1848, No. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Bolland, "Systems of Domination after Slavery", 598; Woodville K. Marshall, "Aspects of Rural Development in the West Indies: Notes on the Peasantry Development in the West Indies Since 1838," *Social and Economic Studies* Vol. 17, No.3, (1968), 254-255; Hall, "The flight from the Estates," 21.

transactions and the fact that the titles that most landholders had were insecure. Hence, labourers in purchasing land ran the risk of becoming embroiled in lengthy and costly legal battle in securing their claims.<sup>37</sup>

The historian Woodville K. Marshall has observed that labourers in the British Caribbean who wanted to establish themselves away from the estates but were unable to buy land, had the option of migrating. During the period 1838 to 1845 the records show that about 335 labourers migrated from the Virgin Islands to Trinidad. Additionally, while it was difficult to determine exactly how many persons migrated from the colony, it was noted that by the end of 1838 about 50 unemployed labourers in Road Town found jobs on Crab Island – a dependency of Puerto Rico – as mechanics and porters. This movement of persons eventually extended to the estates, where considerable numbers of able-bodied workers were being enticed by the high wages that were being offered on Crab Island. Another avenue for migration was the neighbouring island of St. Thomas, where large numbers of workers from the Virgin Islands were employed as porters and jobbers. One of the largest employers of Virgin Islanders in St Thomas was the Royal Mail Steamer Packet Company, which offered employment in its coal yard.<sup>38</sup>

As free people, the labourers in the Virgin Islands resisted the attempts of the planters to control their lives and, in spite of the consequences, made decisions that they felt were in their own interest. While initial attempts to be free from the continuous routine of labour were thwarted through the Vagrancy Act and the non-availability of land for sale, the labourers persevered and were eventually able to access land and establish themselves away from the estates. Emphasis on restructuring the family, with women

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid; CO239/64 S.M. Report July 1841; C.O.243/10 S.M. Report Dec. 1845.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall, "Aspects of Rural Development," 254; PP 1839 (107-V) Papers Relating to the West Indies, Part III, Leeward Islands S.M. Report Oct. 1838 & Jan. 1839; C.O.239/60 S.M. Report Sept. 1840; PP,1846 (332) Immigration, Trinidad MacLeod to Lord Stanley 11 February 1846, No. 75;1844 (530) Emigration Trinidad Returns, No.4; C.O.243/10 S.M. Report Dec. 1845; PP1852-53(1693) Reports Past and Present State, Virgin Islands No.22

giving up field work and focusing on domestic matters and family enterprise helped to expand the foundation that was built during slavery. The support of education for children also showed that the labourers were concerned about the future development of not only themselves but also their community. On the other hand, there were also those labourers who saw migration as one of the means that was available to them as free individuals, and they ventured beyond the confines of the Virgin Islands to seek their fortune. The last response, above all else, was the one most greatly feared by officials in the colony since continuous migration could severely hamper the colony's future economic prospects.<sup>39</sup>

### **Economic Adjustments**

By 1844 there were signs that the Virgin Islands' economy was facing a meltdown as there was only one ship calling into the colony annually, placing great strain on planters to ensure that their produce was ready for when that ship arrived. The ship belonged to the firm Reid, Irvin and Company, which owned and operated the majority of the sugar estates in the colony. Additionally, the firm was the only means by which planters were able to access credit to enable them to get supplies and money to pay wages. The greatest problem for the planters, however, was the fact that the amount of sugar produced in 1844 was far less than in previous years (See Figure 6.1). This was a puzzling situation as the weather had been greatly improved in comparison to the drought conditions of previous years and large quantities of sugar cane were harvested. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that in their attempt to bring in the crop early and to meet the shipping deadline, planters were harvesting the cane before it was ripe. This blunder cost the planters, as the quality of the juice extracted from the cane was below standard and negatively affected the sugar output. There were hopes that the

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<sup>39</sup> Riva Berleant-Schiller, "From Labour to Peasantry in Montserrat After the end of Slavery" in *Small Islands Large Questions: Society, Culture and resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean*, ed. Karen Fog Olwig (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 61-65; Marshall, "Aspects of Rural Development," 255-254; Brereton, 2005:157

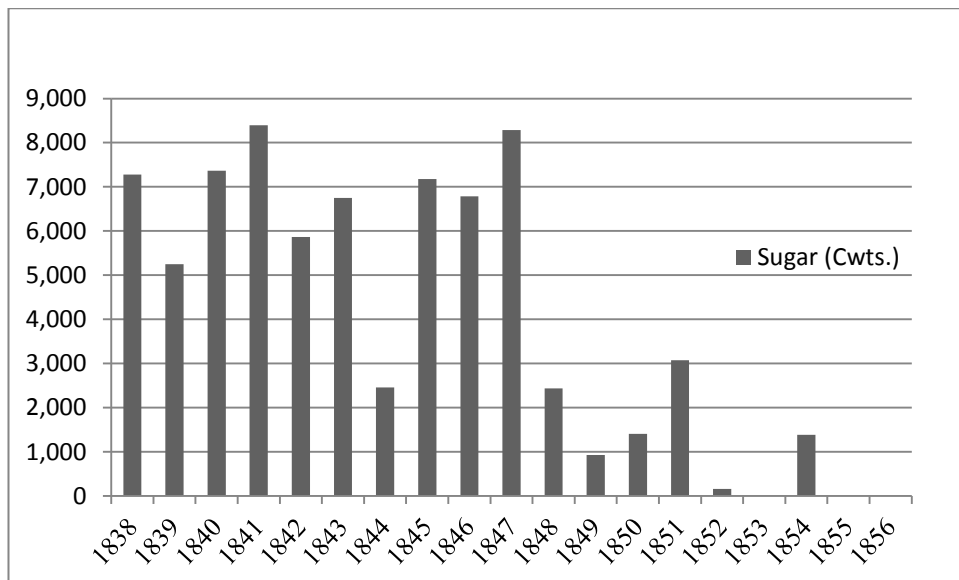
following year's crop would be greatly improved, but considering the circumstances, the planters did not have enough credit to draw adequate amounts of money to pay wages. Thus in preparation for the following crop, in the summer of 1844 the majority of the estates in the colony entered into crop sharing agreements with their labourers.<sup>40</sup>

In the Windward Islands, planters implemented a similar system in 1846 in an attempt to survive the economic depression that was engulfing the British Caribbean. Under this system of production, both the planters and the labourers shared equal risk as each received an equal share of the produce. The crop sharing system allowed planters to retain ownership of their estate and to continue to make a profit, while at the same time not having to expend working capital on wages. Both parties in the agreement contributed equally, with the planter providing the land and machinery and the workers providing the labour. The system was also used successfully in the Bahamas, where after emancipation absentee landlords found they could secure an income from their properties without having to risk scarce capital. Ex-slaves, on the other hand, willingly entered into crop sharing because it made scarce land available to them.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> PP 1846 (691-1) State of the Labouring Population, Part I, S. M. 30 June 1845

<sup>41</sup> Woodville Marshall, "Metayage in the Sugar Industry of the British Windward Islands, 1838-1865", in *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society From Emancipation to the Present*, eds. Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993), 64-65; Howard Johnson, "The Share System in the Bahamas in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries", in *Caribbean Freedom*, eds. Beckles and Shepherd, 125.



**Figure 6.1** Sugar Exported from the Virgin Islands to the United Kingdom, PP1859 Sugar,& etc., Quantities of Sugar Imported from the West Indies (1859), 3-12.

On the Norton Valley Estate on Tortola a crop sharing agreement was made with 33 workers, who were divided into three gangs or family groups, each with a leader. The first group, led by Jacob Pickering, comprised 13 members, while the second group led by Moses had 16 members. The third group – and the smallest, with seven members – was led by John Mears. A different approach to the crop sharing agreement was found at the Joes Hill Estate where the proprietor, John Martin, signed a single agreement with a labourer Benjamin Threlfall. Benjamin then in return entered into an agreement with 12 other labourers offering them equal portions of whatever produce he obtained from the agreement he signed with Martin.<sup>42</sup>

The advent of the crop sharing system, which heralded the beginning of a new and improved type of relationship between the labourers and the planters, also saw the implementation of a system of ‘money’ rent for workers who did not have crop sharing agreement with the planters. This system of ‘money rent’ was adopted by several estates in the Virgin Islands and was made effective on 1 January 1845 and was welcomed by

<sup>42</sup> PP 1845 (642) Correspondence Relative to Labouring Population S.M. Report, December, 1844.

the labourers. Where labourers worked on the estate for wages they were paid at a rate of 8s. per week and were charged rent at a rate of 3s. per week. Where workers did not live on the estate on which they were working, they were paid 9d. a day.<sup>43</sup>

Initially, the system of crop sharing was a huge success. As Figure 6.1 shows, sugar output for the year 1845 was more than double that of the previous crop year. The figure also shows that while there was a slight drop in 1846, the output for 1847 was almost that of the previous high of 1841. There was a sense of equality between the planters who were the holders of the soil and the labourers who made up the productive class. With respect to the crop, both parties could equally succeed or fail as their fortunes were inextricably linked. Under this system, the workers were in a better position to earn more than if they were paid wages. But even in this situation, there were conflicts as the planters invariably felt that not enough time or attention was dedicated to the crop. In these circumstances, labourers were threatened that their share of the crop would be forfeited. The planters, while they were concerned about ensuring that a maximum yield could be obtained from the crop, often overlooked the need for the workers to provide for themselves and their families until such time as the crop was taken in.<sup>44</sup>

In one particular case on the New Bush Estate, after the crop was taken in and the sugar produced, two workers, Allick and Ishmael Todman, were served with notices to quit the estate. What made the situation even worse, was the fact that three barrels of sugar which were to be given to the workers under the crop-sharing contract, were taken from a storage cellar by the manager of the estates and used to pay a debt enforced by the marshal. Feeling themselves cheated, Allick and Ishmael waited until sugar was being

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<sup>43</sup> C.O.243/10 S.M. Report Dec. 1846; PP1845 (642) Labouring Population, Virgin Islands, S.M. Report August 1845.

<sup>44</sup> PP 1846 (691-1) State of the Labouring Population, Part I, S. M. June 30<sup>th</sup> 1845

shipped from the estate and took possession of three barrels. In response to this action, A. C. Hill Smith, the manager of the estate, filed charges of theft against the men. These charges were subsequently dismissed since it was determined that the sugar was rightfully theirs. Thus, by 1848 after some workers found that they were being 'defrauded to a considerable extent,' many of them refused to enter into crop sharing agreements and would only work for the estates if they were being paid wages.<sup>45</sup>

The crop sharing system in the Virgin Islands can be credited with improving the general relationship between workers and planters, in addition to saving the planters from ruin and prolonged decline in sugar production in the colony. Deceit on the part of some planters, however, jeopardized the smooth functioning of the system, causing the labourers to lose trust in them. In the end, the labourers refused to enter into any further crop sharing agreements and forced the planters to implement a reduced working week, leaving workers free to use the remainder of the week for their own personal benefit.<sup>46</sup>

In the aftermath of emancipation, the ex-slaves in the region found that the system of free labour gave them a certain amount of economic power, which they used to bargain for better working conditions and improved rates of pay. This economic power also extended to the internal economy, which the labourers had come to control during the time of slavery. The system of production through the use of provision grounds and sales in the market enabled the labourers to accumulate cash to improve their standard of living.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> C.O. 243/10 S. M. Report Dec. 1847; PP1847-48 (749) Sugar growing colonies, Virgin Islands, Higginson to Earl Grey, 4 May 1848, No. 1 Enclosures, No.1.

<sup>46</sup> C.O.243/10 S.M. Report Dec. 1848.

<sup>47</sup> Marshall, "We be wise to many more tings," 12-20; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 184-190.



In the Virgin Islands, as was observed earlier, the labourers accepted the labour contract and accompanying low wages that were being offered by planters, in an attempt to retain access to their provision grounds and pastures. Maximum use of these facilities enabled the labourers to obtain financial benefits that were equal to or exceeded the wages they were paid. As during slavery and apprenticeship, the areas that continued to be high earners for the labourers were rearing of cattle and other livestock. Thus, as the sugar economy faltered (see Figure 6.1) and direct external trade with Britain ceased, local trade with St. Thomas increased significantly. Exports to the colony included cattle, livestock, fish, butter, salt and ground provisions and were entirely in the hands of the labouring population and facilitated by local vessels.<sup>48</sup>

In 1841 there were 49 vessels with carrying capacities of under 50 tons registered in the colony. These vessels employed some 133 men and constantly traded between Tortola and St. Thomas. By the end of 1846 the number of these registered vessels had risen to 55 and there is no doubt that the number of persons employed to operate them had also risen. In addition to the registered carriers, there were a large number of unregistered fishing boats in the colony that were used by the labourers to transport their goods to the market in St Thomas. Therefore, considering the Virgin Islands' geographic structure – with numerous islands, each with multiple bays and harbours – the movement of goods into and out of the colony was difficult to monitor. The official records, which only reflect a part of the exports from Tortola to St Thomas, show that in 1841 a total of 504 head of cattle, horses and other livestock were exported. In 1842, the number of animals exported increased to 723 and after a reduction in 1843 to 409, reached a new high of 797 in 1844. Internally, there was a large increase in trade with a large number of hucksters who travelled from plantation to plantation selling all kinds of merchandise.

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<sup>48</sup> PP1839(107-V) Papers relative to the West Indies. Part III Leeward Islands Virgin Islands S.M. Report Sept.1838, No.140.

There were increased demands for linen and cotton goods, flour, cornmeal and salt provisions – most of which were believed to have been smuggled into the colony from St Thomas.<sup>49</sup>

As the 1840s were drawing to a close, so too, was the importance of sugar industry in the region. Historian William Green claimed that ‘[t]he combination of free trade and international economic crisis sealed the fate of the old West Indian plantocracy.’ The economic recession of 1847 dealt a deadly blow to the sugar industry of the region. Many estates were abandoned and a large number of West Indian merchants and trading houses went bankrupt, leaving planters unable to collect monies owed to them. In the Virgin Islands, the last remaining trading merchant, Reid, Irvin and Company, ceased trading completely, severing the colony’s only trading link with Great Britain. The Company’s withdrawal from the Virgin Islands greatly impacted the ability of the planters to continue business as they no longer had access to credit, and without this they were unable to pay wages. The workers on the ten estates owned by Reid, Irvin and Company were directly affected as the £50 previously disbursed to meet their weekly wages was withdrawn.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, in a final attempt to remain in business after the workers became disenchanted with the crop-sharing system, a new system of labour was offered by some of the estates. This new system encompassed a four-day working week: two days at a basic rate of 7d. per day and two days as payment for rent on cottages, provision grounds and pasture. While this change seemed like a retrograde step for workers, considering that in years past the salary rate was 9d. per day, it was stated officially ‘that it should be borne

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<sup>49</sup>C.O. 239/67 S.M. Report Dec. 1841; PP1845(642) Correspondence relative to the Labouring Population, West Indies, Virgin Islands S. M. Report Dec. 1844; PP1847(258) Shipping, Return of the number and tonnage of Vessels Registered Dec. 1846;; PP1852(1539) Reports Past and Present Condition Virgin Islands 1851

<sup>50</sup> CO243/10 S.M. Report Dec. 1847; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom* 1992, 208-210; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 234-238

in mind that the privilege of pasture in the colony [was] most extensively taken advantage of by a very large number of the labourers possessing horned cattle.’<sup>51</sup> This sign of success among the freed people was not overlooked by the colony’s government, which as early as 1840 had imposed an annual tax on horned cattle in an attempt to improve the colony’s faltering revenue base. With the imposition of the cattle tax, the number of people in the colony paying direct taxes rose from just under 300 to an excess of 1,000.<sup>52</sup>

Notwithstanding the economic decline of the plantation economy in the colony, freedom had a positive impact on the newly-freed people of the Virgin Islands. With limited access to land outside the estates, they continued to build on the economic base they had established through the use of their provision grounds and access to pastures. The policies of planters, which tied labour to access to houses and provision grounds, were designed to guarantee a labour supply and limit the freedom of choice among the workers. Recognising the value of their provision grounds, the labourers endured the intimidation of the planters, accepted the low wages, and focused their energies on expanding their local export trade with St Thomas. In 1853, Governor Mackintosh, recognising the economic shift in the colony, noted that the labourers looked to St Thomas as the centre of business and that as emancipated people they were enjoying a certain level of material comfort.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Cattle Tax Riot**

During the first few decades after emancipation, the British Caribbean experienced great social and economic changes, some of which led to the attainment of meaningful

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<sup>51</sup> C.O.243/10 S. M. Report 31 December 1847, Table B; PP1851 (1421) Reports to the Secretary of State, Mackintosh to Earl Grey, June 25<sup>th</sup> 1851

<sup>52</sup> Co239/60 S. M. Report August and September 1840; C.O.243/10 S.M. Report June 1841

<sup>53</sup> PP1852-53 (1693) Reports The Past and Present State, Virgin Islands Mackintosh to Newcastle 30 April 1853 No. 22

freedom by the formerly enslaved people of the region. The changes in themselves were not always positive, and at times sparked problems of adjustment as the goals and aspirations of the ex-slaves and those of their former masters collided. In particular, the foremost goal in the mind of the ex-slaves was to obtain lands and establish themselves as peasant proprietors, but they were denied access to cheap land and even prevented from squatting on abandoned properties. In some cases where the labourers were able to obtain land against the odds, they found that they could lose everything (the financial benefits they derived from the land and the land itself) because of the imposition of high taxes. In this volatile period, the resilience of the freed people, developed during decades of enslavement, was clearly evident. During slavery, the ability to endure hardship, when necessary, in attainment of specific goals and knowing when and how to resist, determined the rhythm of life.<sup>54</sup>

Across the British Caribbean, the post emancipation period was marked by widespread unrest fuelled by issues of low wages, poor access to land, high taxes, and lack of political rights. With regards to taxes, after 1838 colonial governments found that the cost of administering the colonies was steadily rising while their revenue base was shrinking. The burden of taxation was shifted from the planters unto the freed people, partly in the hope that their need to pay higher taxes would compel them to work on the estates for wages. These taxes, especially during the economic crisis that engulfed the region, became a source of discontent among the freed people, who looked to Queen Victoria's representatives to afford them relief. But in most, if not all cases, no relief

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<sup>54</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 184-188; Gad Heuman, 'Killing Time' *The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 38-42; Micheal Craton, "Continuity Not Change: The Incidence of Unrest Among Ex-slaves in the British West Indies, 1838-1876" *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol.9, No.2 (1988), 144-170; Bridget Brereton, "Post Emancipation Protest in the Caribbean: The 'Belmanna Riots' in Tobago, 1876" *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 30 No.3&4 (1984), 110-123; Gad Heuman, "Post Emancipation Resistance in the Caribbean: An Overview" in *Small Island Large Question Society, Culture and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean*, ed. Karen Fog Olwig (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 123-134.

was forthcoming and the freed people resisted the measure the only way they knew how – to protest the rights they had waited so long to attain.<sup>55</sup>

In June 1853, a tax bill before the Virgin Islands' House of Assembly called for a fifty per cent increase in the annual cattle tax, raising the amount from 1s. to 1s.6d. per head. While the House debated the measure, there was much murmuring among the people reflecting their dissatisfaction with the proposal. When the bill was approved, the murmuring grew louder. Shortly after, in July, the labourers held a meeting at Chateau Belair, chaired by Thomas Cooke (a member of the Privy Council) and Augustus McCleverty, to prepare a petition to be sent to the Governor urging him not to assent to the Tax Bill. When news of the meeting reached the House of Assembly, Cooke was threatened with legal action for contempt of the House and the petition was abandoned. Clearly, the actions of the House of Assembly hindered the people from formally putting their grievance to the Governor and their next plan of action was to offer passive resistance to the tax<sup>56</sup>

On 1 August 1853, at about 10 am, roughly 50 labourers, – two from every estate on Tortola – went to the Treasurer's office prepared to pay their cattle tax. As they were only prepared to offer 1s. per head rather than the new imposition, the Treasurer refused their payment. In the commotion that ensued, the labourers were ordered to leave the office and the leader of the group, Obadiah Dawson, was arrested and taken to court. As Obadiah was being tried, the labourers gathered outside, vehemently protesting against the proceeding. One labourer, Henry Garnett from Lower Estate, was especially vocal,

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<sup>55</sup> Bolland, "Systems of Domination after Slavery," 592-597; Hall, "The flight from the Estates," 17-20; Heuman, "Post Emancipation Resistance", 132; Heuman, "Is this what you call free?", 105-106; Marshall, "Apprenticeship and labour Relations," 205-22; Marshall, "Aspects of Rural Development," 254.

<sup>56</sup> MMS, Notes of a Riot which occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> of August in Tortola, Robert Hawkins, 1853, 5; MMS, Reputation of Charges wade against the Wesleyan Ministers in Tortola Section No.7.

shouting that one man should not be punished for all and that they must stand together in support of each.<sup>57</sup>

Obadiah was found guilty and fined 1s. Refusing to pay, he was committed to jail. As the labourers tried to rescue Obadiah, Henry Garnett was also arrested and imprisoned. This further infuriated the crowd, causing a full-scale attack on the 24 constables who had gathered. As the Riot Act was being read by a Justice of the Peace, the men formed themselves into two ranks. The rear rank attacked with stones while the front rank, armed with sticks, held off the constables who were using their staves to beat back the crowd. With several of them suffering injuries, the constables eventually retreated, whereupon the labourers withdrew from their position and moved to the upper part of the Town before retiring to their homes. Before leaving the Town, the men vowed to return in greater numbers the following day to finish the business, stating “today is only the smoke[,] tomorrow we’ll see the fire.”<sup>58</sup>

That afternoon the Privy Council was summoned to an emergency meeting to discuss the matter. At about 8 o’clock that night, an urgent request was sent to the Governor of St Thomas seeking assistance. Additionally, a communication was dispatched to the Governor in Antigua, informing him about the events in the colony and seeking his intervention. Locally, one member of the council was directed to seek the assistance of the Methodist missionaries in encouraging the rioters to abide by the law. Further, that night on the advice of the Privy Council, all the gunpowder in the colony was purchased by the government and stored in the court house. At the same time, up to 50 constables

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<sup>57</sup> C.O.239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 1 August 1853, Chad to The Duke of New Castle, 14 August 1853; C.O. 239/95 Minutes of the Privy Council, 13 Aug. 1853, Testimony of Justice Shew and George Porter; C.O. 239/96 Mackintosh to The Duke of New Castle 21 Dec. 1853.

<sup>58</sup> C.O.239/95 Minutes of the meeting of the Privy Council 13 Aug. 1853 testimony of Justice Shew.

were armed; 12 were assigned to guard the prison and 8 to guard the courthouse. That night, however, everything was quiet and there were no signs of disturbance.<sup>59</sup>

At about 9 o'clock the next morning, people from all over the island of Tortola, armed with sticks, gathered at the head of the Town. They were met there by John Haddock, a member of the Privy Council, and a Methodist local preacher, who addressed them, admonishing them to abstain from violence and to conduct themselves peacefully. As the crowd of close to 2,000 men, women and children – equivalent to about half of the population of Tortola – surged into the Town, marching in order, the sound drove fear into the minds of the residents. When the front of the column of protesters approached the area of the Methodist Mission, they were stopped by the two missionaries who were standing on a platform beside the road. The missionaries addressed the crowd and tried to persuade them to return to their homes. In response the people indicated that they wanted the 6d. increase removed from the cattle tax and that the two men who were arrested the previous day be set free. The Missionaries discussed the matter with the crowd and when it was realized that their minds were made up, advised them to go quietly to the treasury, and if their offer to pay the old amount of the tax was rejected they should go home quietly. The crowd then requested that Haddock, whom they trusted and respected, should take their concerns to the president and negotiate on their behalf while they waited at the treasury. Haddock agreed to the request and proceeded to government house to lay the grievances before President Chad.<sup>60</sup>

President Chad agreed to release the prisoners, but stated that he would only put the tax grievance before the Legislature if he were properly petitioned. These offers were enough to pacify the crowd, which retreated to the outer edge of the Town where they

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid; C.O.239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 2 & 3 August 1853; C.O. 239/95 Minutes of the meeting of the Privy Council, 1 Aug. 1853.

<sup>60</sup> MMS Notes of a Riot which occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> of Aug. 1853, in Tortola, Robert Hawkins,

waited for the release of the prisoners. As a considerable amount of time elapsed before this occurred, a group of young men went back into Town where they were provoked into a confrontation by the armed constables who were guarding the courthouse. In the confusion that followed the constables opened fire on the group of young men, killing one of them, James Raymer, and seriously injuring several others.<sup>61</sup>

The sound of gunshots and the news of James Raymer's death quickly reached the remote section of the Town where some of the protesters were preparing to go home. They returned to Town by the hundreds and a full-scale riot erupted. By nightfall, with fires raging and spreading through the Town, the white residents abandoned the colony for the safety of the nearby Danish islands. President Chad, the only remaining government official, who had barricaded himself inside Government house, declared "I stand alone – No council! No assembly! No public officers!"<sup>62</sup>

On the third day, a large number of the protesters attended the funeral of James Raymer where they were entreated by the missionaries to desist in their behaviour. After much pleading, the majority of the people returned to their homes quietly but a few individuals remained in the Town, continuing their acts of destruction. Several houses and properties in the countryside - in particular at the Hope and Albion Estates - were also burnt or ransacked. That night, at about 8 pm, a contingent of 30 Danish soldiers arrived on Tortola to help restore law and order. The following week two contingents of British soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 67<sup>th</sup> West India regiment also arrived in the colony.

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<sup>61</sup> C.O.239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 2 August, 1853; C.O. 239/95 Minutes of the meeting of the Privy Council, 13 Aug. 1853, testimonies of Justice Shew, and Joseph Gordon.

<sup>62</sup> MMS Notes of a Riot which occurred on 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> of Aug. 1853 in Tortola, Robert Hawkins; C.O. 239/95 Minutes of the meeting of the Privy Council, 13 Aug. 1853, testimonies of Robert Pedder; C.O.239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 6 August 1853.



With this level of security, the residents who had fled to St Thomas returned and a full investigation into the riot was mounted. Some 58 individuals were arrested.<sup>63</sup>

Like the conspiracy of 1831, the response of the labouring population in the Virgin Islands to the increase in the cattle tax caught the white community by surprise. As the people had quietly endured the injustices of the past, they were seen as incapable of rising up against their former masters. President Chad was of the opinion that the Methodist missionaries were entirely to blame for the event because they had ‘unsettled the minds of the labouring population to taxes.’ In Chad’s view, the problem started earlier when the missionaries encouraged the people to sign a petition requesting that the mission be exempted from certain taxes to enable the institution to fund continuing work in education. The investigation into the cause of the riot, however, exonerated the missionaries and acknowledged their efforts to prevent the destruction of the entire Town and to promote the return to order by the labouring population.<sup>64</sup>

As in other situations of unrest in the Caribbean, officials in the Virgin Islands were quick to point an accusing finger at others rather than accept the responsibility for inciting the people by their own actions, or in some cases inaction. In the colony, it was determined that the cattle tax riot was not based on a specific plan on the part of any individual or group of people, but was a spontaneous response to a series of unfortunate incidents. Notwithstanding Governor Mackintosh’s description of the ‘impulsive character’ of the labourers, it was felt that if officials had responded differently to the people’s request, the matter would have ended differently. Also, the fact that President Chad – with his military background – did not seem to have the ability to make

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<sup>63</sup> C.O. 239/95 Chad to Mackintosh, 3 August 1853; MMS Notes of a Riot which occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> of Aug. 1853, in Tortola, Robert Hawkins; C.O. 239/96 Isaac to Mackintosh, 14 Dec. 1853.

<sup>64</sup> CO314/12 Resolution, 7 June 1854; Co239/95 Chad to Mackintosh, 3 August 1853; C.O.239/95 Chad to the Duke of Newcastle 14 August 1853.

concessions and manage the situation more effectively, was considered unhelpful. In short, then, the rise in the cattle tax was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, as after decades of endurance, the people's power to endure failed.<sup>65</sup>

In the first round of cases tried, seven prisoners (four males and three females) were sentenced to death and 42 others, 30 males and 12 females, were sentenced to imprisonment for terms ranging from three months to three years. Several prisoners, in addition to their custodial sentences, were also fined sums varying from £5 to £10. The prisoners who were sentenced to death were convicted of what was described as the most hideous crime, that is, setting fire to a house while the occupants were still inside. On 2<sup>nd</sup> August after James Raymer had been shot and killed, the crowd attacked the courthouse where the armed constables were held up. The building was pelted with stones and one constable, William Porter, testified that he heard the voice of a woman in the crowd cry out 'go bring fire since they wouldn't come out we will burn them out.' Several witnesses also testified that they saw Mary Hodge, Molly Cuffy and Juliana Fleming carrying coals of fire in coconut shells and collecting trash, which was used to set the fire. One witness, Lucy Williams, also described seeing Molly in a crouching position kindling a fire under the courthouse.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike the 1831 conspiracy in the Virgin Islands, when no women were directly involved (see Chapter 4), women evidently played an active role in the 1853 cattle tax riot. In addition to being arsonists, the women were also involved in physical attacks and vocalizing the goal of the riots. For example Henry Buntin, one of the armed constables, said he saw Judy throw a stone that struck a constable on his head. He also stated that he heard her shouting that the Town would be burnt and that two constables

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<sup>65</sup> C.O. 239/2 Mackintosh to George Gray, 9 September, 1854

<sup>66</sup> C.O. 239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 1 Dec. 1853 Evidence in the Case, testimonies of William Porter, Henry Buntin John Felix Margaret Roach Elizabeth Romney and Lucy Williams, List of Convictions.

would be killed in revenge for Raymer's death. Overall about 33 per cent of those convicted for involvement in the riot were women.<sup>67</sup>

In spite of the widespread destruction in the colony, not one white person was killed or seriously injured. The people, in their desperation, had turned to the President to seek relief from a tax they were unable to pay, but he demanded a formal petition, which the people in their rage delivered with fire and destruction. Long overlooked, used and disregarded, the people spoke with one voice, their passive resistance practiced through decades of slavery and during apprenticeship at that instance turned into open rebellion. The fact that the repressive tax became payable on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, the people's day of liberation, served only to exacerbate tensions, demonstrating a lack of sensitivity towards the labourers that was institutionalised in the colony. Mindful of these facts, some of the labourers felt that it was time to remove the final cloak of oppression that was making their lives difficult.<sup>68</sup>

When the initial attempt of the labourers to quietly resist the tax increase failed, they vowed that they would return to the Town the following day with an overpowering force and turn Tortola into St Domingo. Like their ancestors and struggling freedmen across the region, the labourers in the Virgin Islands still regarded the Haitian Revolution as a model of protest that could be emulated. In this revolutionary spirit, seven labourers took possession of Lower Estate a few days after rioting and commenced to grind sugar cane and make sugar. When this information was relayed to President Chad, he had them arrested and imprisoned. Even as calm was restored in the colony and arrests were being made, there was unease because there were clear

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<sup>67</sup>CO239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 1 Dec. 1853 Evidence in the Case, testimonies Henry Buntin, Schedule of Convictions; Co239/25 Maxwell to Goderick, No. 3, Minutes of the evidence of the trial, Testimony of Thomas Caines.

<sup>68</sup>C.O. 239/2 Mackintosh to Grey, 9 September, 1854; ; C.O. 239/95 Minutes of the meeting of the Privy Council, 13 Aug. 1853, testimonies of Justice Shew; C.O. 239 Chad to the Duke of Newcastle, 14 Aug. 1853.

indications that the labourers were arming themselves while waiting for the departure of the Danish soldiers. A bloody revolt was anticipated as the labourers had also indicated they would kill all the white people and elect their own Governor. This fear was further heightened during the trial of those arrested, when it was reported that the people on the western end of Tortola were acquiring weapons in preparation for a major attack, to coincide with the end of the trial if anyone was sentenced to death.<sup>69</sup>

The historian Norwell Harrigan posits that the 1853 riot marked the foundation of a ‘truly indigenous Virgin Islands society.’ He saw the event as a determined attempt on the part of the people to break with the past and let their presence be felt. Through their hard work as peasants, in spite of the minimal wages paid by the estates, the labourers had expanded their efforts in cattle-rearing, greatly enhancing their economic position. This success was not overlooked by the government, which, after having instituted a tax on cattle in 1840, saw a 50 per cent increase on the basic rate as a suitable means to raise additional revenue to fund capital projects. The impact of the 1853 riot was so strong that, thereafter, the Legislature went to great pains to ensure the system of taxation was within the means of the people. But most notably, 1 August 1853 stood as a reminder and a symbol of the alternative that was available to the people when the government refused to listen to their cries.<sup>70</sup>

During the period of tension following the 1853 riot, President Chad informed his superiors that the colony had reached a difficult stage. In his opinion, the only way the labourers would be governed was if there were troops stationed in the colony and warships visiting regularly. Even more importantly, Chad was convinced that the time

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<sup>69</sup> C.O. 239 Chad to the Duke of Newcastle, 14 Aug. 1853; Gad Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press 1994), 40, 59 & 148; Green *British Slave Emancipation*, 390-395.

<sup>70</sup> Norwell Harrigan, *The Long March to Freedom A Glimpse at the Virgin Islands* (Laurel publication International 1985); Isaac Dookhan, *History of the British Virgin Islands 1672 to 1970* (Essex: Bowker Publishing Co. 1975), 157.

was right for constitutional change. He recommended the disbanding of the House of Assembly and its replacement by a Legislative Council of nine members, the size of which reflected his conviction that not all white residents who had fled from the colony would ever return and that, even if they did, they might not stay. On 26 August 1854, these proposals were implemented as a response to conditions laid down by the British government for financial assistance to the colony to meet the cost of the riot of 1853. In this respect, therefore, the actions of the protestors against the rise in the cattle tax helped to bring political change to the Virgin Islands.<sup>71</sup> A similar constitutional outcome followed similar reactions by liberated people of African descent to their continuing repression in other places in the Caribbean after 1838. Eleven years after the Virgin Islands' House of Assembly was disbanded, the Jamaican House of Assembly was encouraged to adopt similar measures following the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion. This action was considered to be the only way to prevent the colony from becoming a second Haiti. In 1866 other colonies in the Leeward Islands – Antigua, St. Kitts and Nevis – also saw their local House of Assembly disbanded.<sup>72</sup>

Three years after the 1853 cattle tax riots, on 24 November 1856, there was further unrest in the Virgin Islands, this time on one of the Cays. In response to the attempted seizure of a boat custom officials suspected was trading without a licence, the people of Thatch Island resisted, beat the Sub-treasurer and his crew, and forced them to flee the island. Two days later, four constables were sent to Thatch Island to arrest the offenders, but, on their arrival, were met on the beach by a crowd of about 50 people. When the officers proceeded to arrest the individuals, the crowds attacked, severely beating the officers and compelling them to hastily retreat from the island. The constables reported that the people were very violent in their language and that they had

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<sup>71</sup> C.O239/95 Chad to Mackintosh 6 Aug. 1853; C.O. 239/2 Mackintosh to Sir. George Grey 9 Sept. 1854.

<sup>72</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 395-399.

told them that they were prepared to have a repeat of the 1853 riot. The constables said that as they made their escape from the island, the crowd ascended a hill, raised several flags and gave three cheers.<sup>73</sup>

The actions of the people on Thatch Island resembled the response of the labourers on the Goshen Estate in Jamaica who objected to high tax assessment and the confiscation of personal property when payments could not be made. While in the case of Goshen it took the intervention of the military to bring an end to the situation, in the case of Thatch Island the matter was only resolved when the Methodist missionaries intervened, encouraging the people to allow the offending individuals to be arrested. It was clear that by the mid-1850s the labouring population in the Virgin Islands had reached a new stage of development in which they were fully prepared to offer open resistance in defence of their rights as free people.<sup>74</sup>

### **Land Acquisition**

As was stated earlier, one of the goals of the ex-slaves in the region was to acquire land and establish themselves away from the states. In the Virgin Islands, this process was retarded by several factors, the most important of which was the reluctance on the part of planters to sell. Towards the close of the 1840s, however, as the economic decline of sugar continued and the agricultural sector struggled under the effects of hurricanes and intermittent drought, property in the colony was greatly devalued. Planters found themselves in a very precarious position as it was stated that ‘there were no properties in the Virgin Islands whose holders [were] not embarrassed for the want of capital or credit.’ As a result of this on-going situation large portions of property fell into the hands of the ex-slaves. They pooled their resources and jointly purchased large tracts of

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<sup>73</sup> CO314/4 Kortright to Gov. Hamilton, 29 November, 1856, No. 41,

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, Heuman, *The killing Time*, 40-41.

land. Similarly, in Montserrat, bankruptcy forced many proprietors to sell small portions of land to raise the funds needed to stay afloat.<sup>75</sup>

In 1857, as the President of the colony bemoaned the declining state of the sugar industry he marvelled at the success of the peasantry in their efforts, stating:

The patches of garden culture, where almost every description of tropical vegetable may be seen in tolerable luxuriance, even at the highest points of our lofty hills, prove satisfactorily that wherever the Negro has by the absolute purchase of land obtained an interest in its productiveness that productiveness is in fair process of development. He has become as it were a part of the soil on which he stands. There is a mutual dependence, and the result is all that may be fairly expected at this early date.<sup>76</sup>

The ownership of land by the peasants was seen as a positive development with regards to the economic viability of the colony, but this process was hindered greatly by the fact that a large portion of the land in the colony was held in receivership or in the court of chancery. During the period 1860 to 1864, a total of 109 land transactions were registered with the colony's registrar of deeds. Of these transactions, 33 were for the sale of property that was publicly auctioned by officers of the court. These properties were of different sizes and categories: 10 transactions were for lots of one acre or less; another 10 transactions involved whole estates or parcels of land over 50 to 179 acres; and the remaining 13 were for properties of under 50 acres and more than five acres.<sup>77</sup>

The availability and sale of land in the Virgin Islands greatly increased with the local adoption of the West Indies Encumbered Estate Act in 1864. This act, first passed by the British Parliament in 1854 was designed to 'facilitate the sale of properties laden with complicated debts.' The Act was subsequently adopted by most British Caribbean colonies, the exceptions being Barbados, Trinidad, St Lucia and British Guiana. In most

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<sup>75</sup> Berleant-Schiller, "From Labour to Peasantry", 53-72; PP1846 (728) Reports Past and Present No. 25 Virgin Islands (1845), 115; PP1847-1848 (749) Sugar Growing Colonies, Virgin Islands, Higginson to Earl Grey 4 May 1848, Enclosure No.1.

<sup>76</sup> PP1859 (2567) Reports Past and Present State, No. 22 Virgin Islands (1857), 153.

<sup>77</sup> VIA (Virgin Islands Archives) Virgin Islands Deed Book, 1860 -1872.

instances, estates were sold to those who held debts on them, thereby facilitating the consolidation of holdings and even the improvement of their management. This, in turn, encouraged a move away from traditional family-run estates towards larger commercial enterprises.<sup>78</sup>

The Encumbered Estate Act was not intended to promote access to land for the Black majority in the British West Indies, but in the Virgin Islands it had precisely this consequence after its adoption there. Indeed they were the main buyers of encumbered estates in the colony. Immediately after the Act became operative in the Virgin Islands, eight major estates, previously abandoned for up to 40 years and ranging in size from 30 to 200 acres, came up for sale. The Cappaons Bay Estate, comprising 30 acres and in Chancery for over 35 years was among the first to be sold. It was bought for £41 by Augustus McCleverty, who in 1835, as a 26 year-old coloured apprentice, had purchased his freedom for £19.16s. The price paid for Cappaons Bay Estate set the tone for other purchases, reflecting the poor state of the sugar sector in the Virgin Islands and the consequent low price of property, thereby bringing property-ownership within the range of other enterprising ex-apprentices. The first eight estates sold under the Act, totalling 780 acres, were acquired for just £979 or an average of £1.5s. per acre. Such low prices provided a golden opportunity for land-hungry former slaves and apprentices to realise their ambitions in the Virgin Islands.<sup>79</sup>

Within months of the introduction of the Encumbered Estates Act in the colony, it was being officially reported that freed people mainly employed in livestock rearing and provision production owned the greater part of the soil in the Virgin Islands. In 1863, taxes were paid on 1,898 head of cattle; in the same year, 1,414 cattle were exported,

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<sup>78</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 225-257; Craton, 'Continuity not Change,' 163.

<sup>79</sup> PP1866 (3719) (3719-1) Reports Showing the State of Colonial Possessions 1864 Part I West Indies and Mauritius, 133-137; Isaac Dookhan, *History of the British Virgin Islands*, 134-135.



suggesting, that when allowance is made for local consumption, the actual number of cattle owned by the freed people in the colony was probably larger than what was reported officially. Assuming that only a small percentage of any herd was exported annually, the actual number of cattle in the colony could have been in excess of 3,000 in 1863. Thus within a decade of the cattle tax riots of 1853, economic life within the colony was transformed, as the former slaves and apprentices became land-owning peasants, dominating key areas of commercial and economic activity such as livestock production, and exports.<sup>80</sup>

The other side of this transformation was a sharp decline in the colony's reliance on sugar as the main export commodity. In tandem with this there was also a shift from reliance on English markets to reliance on the nearby Danish Islands, with its associated encouragement to the local boat ownership and construction in the colony.<sup>81</sup> By 1864, too, the few remaining sugar estates operating in the colony were all cultivated on a sharecropping basis, in which freed people were partners with estate owners in production to their mutual economic benefit. Almost forty years earlier, in 1826, Major Moody, in writing on the economic conditions in the Virgin Islands after the abolition of the slave trade and in the midst of mounting external efforts to end slavery itself, had concluded 'that after a period of time which may not be remote, as regards Tortola, the scene will be closed, and the doom fixed of the English race of men in that island'. That day was perhaps longer in coming than Moody imagined. But what Moody failed to foresee was that, when it came, the freed people of the colony would have the chance to prosper on the back of the doomed 'English race'.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> PP1864 (3304)(3304-1) Reports Showing the Past and Present State of Colonial Possessions, Part I West Indies and Mauritius, (1862), 92-95.

<sup>82</sup> PP1826 (81) Slave Trade, Second Part of Major Moody's Report (1826), 76.

## **Summary**

Despite the ending of apprenticeship in 1838, planters in the Virgin Islands attempted to control their labourers through contracts that linked access to rent-free housing and provision grounds to estate labour. Other means of control included repressive vagrancy laws, designed to prevent labour from squatting on abandoned property. The labourers resisted the attempts of the planters to control their lives, and made specific decisions with regards to the withdrawal of women and children from fieldwork. In some cases, they migrated to other colonies in search of better paying jobs. During the period of economic adjustment that followed 1834-38, freed labourers accepted low wages in order to retain access to their provision grounds and pastures, the produce from which may have been of greater value to them than the wages they obtained. The value they placed on such activities was underlined in 1853, when efforts to raise taxes on cattle prompted a full-scale riot that changed the course of political history in the colony and, in combination with other developments, helped to create the opportunity for former slaves and apprentices to become owner-occupying peasants and commercial farmers. A quarter of a century after the ending of apprenticeship in the Virgin Islands, ownership of almost all the land in the Virgin Islands had been transferred from whites and former slave owners to freed people of African descent. It was a remarkable social transformation, barely imaginable to slave-owning generations of earlier times, but testimony to the agency, enterprise and determination of the slaves and their descendants over whom they had once ruled.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to investigate the process of transition from slavery to freedom in the Virgin Islands' slave society. To this end demographic information on slaves in the colony was entered into a database which allowed a comprehensive analysis of the social life of the enslaved population. The statistical findings were supported by information from other archival sources. As the slave was the unit of analysis, statistics from the database helped to identify indicators of transition reflected in the demographic structures of the slave population. The study found that transition from slavery to freedom in the Virgin Islands was a continuous process that extended from 1807 to 1864.

Demographically, as shown in Chapter 1, during the period 1807 to 1818 the Virgin Islands started to exhibit demographic characteristics similar to other colonies in the region. The majority of the enslaved were creoles and there was a slightly higher percentage of females than males. Demographic variations were also seen within the two economic blocs – Tortola, the sugar sector; and the Cays, the non-sugar sector. In these areas the material condition of the slaves was dictated by the staple crop, with slaves in the sugar sector of Tortola being more negatively affected than slaves in the non-sugar sector of the Cays. It was observed that in 1818 the structure of the slave population reflected that of a closed and settled community. This situation greatly contributed to the settled state of the enslaved as they assumed more responsibility for subsisting for themselves. Socially and culturally, the enslaved also used their experiences to develop and refine their social existence as they interacted with other members of the slave society. An acceptable compromise, with respect to the conditions of slavery, had been reached following the execution of the first white planter for the

murder of a slave. This case had local, regional and international significance and provided impetus for the adoption of slave registers in the British Caribbean.

In spite of the relatively small size of the Virgin Islands, the colony can be seen as a microcosm of the wider slave society of the British Caribbean. The experiences of the varying types of slave societies in the region are all represented in the Virgin Islands with respect to the sugar and non-sugar producing colonies.

The settled state of the enslaved in the Virgin Islands, however, was marred by dislocation as a result of sale and ownership transfers. High rates of internal transfer meant that a substantial portion of the enslaved population found themselves changing owners frequently, having to find new homes. The slaves that were most affected by these transfers were those on the Cays where close to 20 per cent of their population was transferred in the period 1818-1822 as opposed to 12 per cent of the population on Tortola.

The case of the management takeover of the Lettsome estate by the Mortgagee gave a vivid example of how the enslaved were used and manipulated by their owners. As a result of the slaves' involvement in assisting their former owner in forcibly taking control of the estate, they were open to reprisals from the mortgagee who regained management of the facility. Large scale movement of slaves within the colony, especially from the Cays to Tortola, resulted in major changes in their material condition as they were not familiar with the rigors of sugar production. This was the case for a number of slaves who were relocated from Anegada and Virgin Gorda to sugar estates on Tortola.

The range of transfers ultimately extended as large numbers of the enslaved in the Virgin Islands became part of the inter-regional slave trade that developed after the abolition of the African slave trade. This level of dislocation was objected to by the enslaved, some of whom vowed that they would not comply. The example of the slaves on the Josiah's Bay estate who were charged with being involved in a riot and sentenced to transportation only to be taken to Trinidad, shows the extent to which slave owners were prepared to go in order to achieve their goals. The inter-regional trade and transfer of slaves and the effects on the individual slave society have been empirically examined. This analysis enables us to understand the impact which this activity had on a slave society.

The level of disruption and dislocation in the lives of the enslaved, however, encouraged some of the slaves to seek their freedom through manumission. Chapter 3 shows that the Virgin Islands had the highest rate of manumission among the sugar colonies and was second to the Bahamas, which had the highest rate regionally. In the period 1822 to 1825 the rate of manumission was 5.2 persons per thousand, up from 3.8 persons per thousand in 1818 to 1822. In 1825 to 1828 there was a further increase to 6.4 manumissions per thousand. One of the most interesting findings revealed in the study, is the fact that while in the region manumissions were found to be an urban phenomenon, in the Virgin Islands the minority population on the Cays accounted for a proportionately higher number of manumissions than in the population on Tortola.

Examples of how individual slaves were able to attain manumission show that it was a social process that was facilitated by relationships that were developed beforehand. In particular, we observe the lengths that freedmen and women went to secure manumission for their relatives. As in other slave societies, coloured slaves in the

Virgin Islands were found to have a greater advantage at obtaining manumission than black slaves.

Indeed the rate of manumission in the Virgin Islands indicated the desire on the part of the enslaved to seek their freedom when the opportunity presented itself. Chapter 4 shows that those individuals who remained enslaved continued to resist the system of slavery in various ways. Running away and absenting themselves from their master was found to be a common strategy used by the slaves in the Virgin Islands. The findings show that the colony had a higher rate of absenteeism than any other colony in the region. Running away was also used by the enslaved as a means of negotiating improved working conditions, influencing manumission and gaining their freedom. Among the slaves from the Town who ran away, the females were all in the younger age categories while the males were all middle aged or older.

Slaves who did not run away but remained on the estates also resisted their enslavement on a day to day basis, with activities that were designed to disrupt the regular rhythm of life on the estate. The majority of slaves found ways to adapt to their enslavement and used the concessions granted to further develop their internal economy, which enabled them to further improve their material condition, thereby enabling them to survive. This growing autonomy among the enslaved in the Virgin Islands eventually led to them conspiring to take their freedom by force. However, the discovery of this plot resulted in a change in the relationship between the enslaved and their masters and the imposition of greater levels of security in the colony. The conspiracy, which was echoed in the major revolt in Jamaica, showed that the enslaved in the Virgin Islands had a thirst for freedom that could not be quenched. The relationship between the enslaved and their holders had reached a critical point.

Chapter 5 reveals that the apprenticeship system was viewed as delivering a questionable form of freedom. In many instances the same issues and problems experienced during slavery continued. Similarly, the apprentices responded in much the same way, resisting the system and finding ways to improve themselves. Some slaves decided to seek manumission and migrate to other colonies in search of better paying jobs. As the system progressed there was evidence that the planters were improving their approach to labour management, to which the enslaved reciprocated.

In spite of the difficulties experienced by the apprentices, they continued to focus their attention on developing their niche market supported by their provision ground and pastures. In fact, that local market soon developed an external component as livestock was exported to St. Thomas. This was a timely development as the sugar industry continued to decline, making more land available for provision grounds and pastures.

The end of the apprenticeship system in 1838 brought the freedom that was long awaited by the slaves in the region. Chapter 6 shows that the planters' fear of losing control of their labour, forced them to implement coercive measures to retain control over the lives of the ex-slaves. The labour contracts that were offered to the ex-slaves were linked to free housing, provision grounds and pastures. Again, as during slavery the apprentices resisted attempts to control their lives. They, however, continued to accept low wages in an attempt to retain access to their provision grounds and pastures. These facilities allowed the labourers to take advantage of the growing export market in cattle and other livestock. The growing viability of this market resulted in a 50 per cent increase in the cattle tax in an effort to raise revenue in the colony. This increase led to a large-scale riot on Tortola which revealed the deep-seated desires on the part of the ex-slave to take full responsibility for their affairs. The rioters invoked the principles of St.

Domingo and expressed their desire to establish a free black state. The colony had reached a crucial stage in which the freed people were not deterred from violent expressions of their dissatisfaction with continued disparities within the society.

The spirit of defiance continued and spread to the Cays, where residents who were inspired by events on Tortola were engaged in violent confrontations with revenue officials. The unsettled environment and continued decline of the sugar industry led to the abandonment of sugar estates. Thus, with a large percentage of the property in the colony bankrupted and others in Chancery, the Encumbered Estate Act was passed. This Act facilitated the sale of these encumbered properties and by 1864 almost all of the property in the colony was held by the former slaves.

This untold story of the enslaved people of the Virgin Islands explored the impact they had on shaping their history during the final decades of slavery and beyond. Within the confines of slavery, the enslaved in the Virgin Islands laid an economic foundation that became the alternate economy on which the future of the colony depended in the post-emancipation era. This attention to and success with provision grounds and pastures, underscored for Virgin Islanders in slavery and freedom the importance of land ownership. In acquiring land the free people of the Virgin Islands attained for themselves meaningful freedom. 'He who owns the land, owns the country' is one of the greatest legacies of slavery and emancipation in the lives of Virgin Islanders.



APPENDIX A      Codebook

Variable	SPSS Variable Name	Coding Instructions
Identification Number	ID	Number assigned to each slave
Name	Name	Name of each slave
Initial Registration	Registration	1 = 1818      4 = 1828 2 = 1822      5 = 1831 3 = 1825      6 = 1834
Sex	Sex	1 = Males      2 = Females
Place of Birth	POB	1 = Virgin Is      9 = Salt Islands 2 = West Indies      10 = Cooper Island 3 = America      11 = Beef Island 4 = Africa      12 = Frenchman's Cay 5 = Tortola      13 = Guana Island 6 = Virgin Gorda      14 = Camanoe 7 = Anegada      15 = Thatch Island 8 = Jost Van Dyke
Colour of Slaves	Colour	1 = Black      2 = Coloured
Reputed Age of Slaves	Age	Age in years
Slave Owner	Owner	Name of Slave Owner
Place of residence	Island	1 = Tortola 2 = Virgin Gorda 3 = Anegada 4 = Jost Van Dyke 5 = Salt Island 6 = Cooper Island 7 = Beef Island 8 = Frenchman Cay 9 = Guana Island 10 = Camanoe 11 = Thatch Island 12 = Unknown
*Changing Circumstance      1822	Fate1822	1 = Sold 2 = Gifted 3 = Manumitted 4 = Absconded 5 = Dead 6 = Transferred 7 = Birth 8 = Returned Fugitive 9 = Correction 10 = Imported 11 = Transported 12 = Exported

## APPENDIX B

### Slave Registration Forms

### SCHEDULE (A)

A LIST and RETURN of all Negro and other Slaves, now resident and belong to, or in the possession  
of,.....

Given in by me this .....day of .....one thousand eight hundred and .....

No.	Name	Sex	Country or part of the world which they are Natives.	Colour	Reputed age

*Source: Parliamentary Papers 1818 (443)4*

### SCHEDULE (B)

A LIST and RETURN of all the Additions to the original Stock of Slaves resident .....and  
belonging to, or in the lawful possession of,.....whether by birth, purchase,  
return of fugitive or absent Slaves, or otherwise, since the last Return

Given in by me this .....day of .....one thousand eight hundred and .....

No.	Name	Sex	Country or part of the world which they are Natives.	Colour	Reputed age

*Source: Parliamentary Papers 1818 (443)4*

### SCHEDULE (C)

A LIST and RETURN of all Deductions from the original Stock of Slaves resident .....and  
belong to, or in the lawful possession of,.....whether by Death, Sale, Manumission,  
absconding or other-wise, since the last Return.

Given in by me this .....day of .....one thousand eight hundred and

.....

No. On original List, or subsequent Return	Name	Sex	Death, manumitted, sold or absconded	If sold, to whom	Colour	Date of sale

*Source: Parliamentary Papers 1818 (443)4*

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